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**In the AND: Experimentation and the Impossible
in the Art of John Murchie, Mary Scott and Eric Cameron**

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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Abstract

In the AND: Experimentation and the Impossible in the Work of John Murchie, Mary Scott and Eric Cameron

It is generally understood that certain kinds of art, particularly those associated with the historical and neo-avant-gardes, are experimental. Sadly, very little scholarship addresses this popular assumption in a serious way. Theorisations of 'experimental art' persistently define it in terms of a break with tradition, a cult of the new, a teleological quest, an aesthetic science of progress or an aggressive nihilism. In most cases, however, experimentation is absorbed by more widely embraced concepts such as 'chance' or 'the absurd.' All too frequently it is left to function simply as an adjective. The artwork of John Murchie, Mary Scott and Eric Cameron provides us with an opportunity to consider programmatic and rhetorical experimentation in greater depth. At the same time, it affords us an experimental protocol in which we are invited to participate pragmatically. The advent of poststructuralism in the late '70s coincided with the production of a discrete group of substantial theoretical and philosophic texts that addressed art and literature from a perspective informed by the avant-garde. In many ways this theory is also an invitation to experiment. At the very least it provides us with an opportunity to consider art in terms of a multiplicity of experimental valences.

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Foreword

And so...

This thesis has been executed with the intention of creating an assemblage of artists, theorists, texts, images, concepts, programmes and politics. What follows presently has been conceived as a tableau in which a rough sketch of the theory upon, and in which, this thesis works might be presented to the reader.

While addressing possibly the most vociferous criticism of deconstruction (its lack of politics), Derrida makes a passing observation: “the conjunction ‘and’ brings together words, concepts, perhaps things that don’t belong to the same category. A conjunction such as ‘and’ dares to defy order, taxonomy, classificatory logic, no matter how it works: by analogy, disjunction or opposition.”¹ If deconstruction is political, as Derrida shows convincingly, it is not in the traditional sense of this word, but rather as a politics of ‘and.’ Deconstruction conserves what it works upon. It effects deterioration where criticism attempts destruction. Respecting what it ruins in its ruination, it eschews the revelation of error in order to cast doubt, not upon what is expendable, but upon that which we cannot do without.²

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Force of the Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David Gray Carlson (New York & London: Routledge, 1992) 3.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, quoted by Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.

‘And’ also implies a repetitious movement, a repetition that contaminates the singularity of speech as well as transcendental signifiers like ‘God,’ ‘Being’ or ‘Phallus.’ In order for a word to be a word it must be repeatable and this repetition haunts the self-presence of speech with an absence. The singularity of God is also the ‘and us’ of the language that names him. This applies equally to concepts such as ‘unity’ and ‘oneness’ that must, in order to be communicable, forfeit their autonomy at the very moment that they declare their freedom. ‘The singular,’ ‘the one’ and ‘the same’ all function as synonyms, and this is a contamination of ‘and also.’

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasise another act of defiance performed by ‘and,’ this time against the singularity of the ontological. The philosophico-poetic texts that these two theorists negotiated over several years of collaboration function, on a very general level, as an assemblage of concept-toolboxes.³ Their writing is filled with imperatives, one of the most resonant being to “establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings.”⁴ If one were in the habit of reduction, and it is a very difficult habit to break, one might say that all these imperatives add up or boil down to (are more and less than) experimentation – “a logic of the AND.”⁵ Experimentation is for Deleuze and Guattari a process of becoming that

³ See Brian Massumi, “Translator’s Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy,” *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xv.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 25.

causes the social organism to leak (sprout radicals) along molecular lines (micro-cracks) of differentiation.

*For a deconstructive operation possibility would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible.*⁶

Deconstruction is, of course, disinclined to evoke the revolutionary diagrams that Deleuze and Guattari favour, but it is nonetheless experimental in its movement. The term deconstruction functions as an amazingly polysemous address throughout Derrida's writings. It is, among other things, a method, a movement, an 'at work,' a polylogue, and a 'come.' As such, there is the sense that deconstruction is both more and less than what it names, that it, in fact, deconstructs itself. If deconstruction is an encounter with the impossible (with chance) it is also the movement and working of chance itself; it is profoundly indeterminate. This accounts for the intricacies of Derridian texts that follow an indeterminate and inventive rhythm. "If [deconstruction] has a chance, it is to the extent that it moves on, that it gets transformed, that it is not immediately recognized, that it is recognized without being recognized."⁷ If deconstruction has a chance – if it is to bear witness to chance, to the inhuman in the human – it must continue to follow an experimental line that does not resolve itself in a specific programme, but which is

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Force of the Law," 30.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," interview by Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Peter Brunette & David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28.

nonetheless rhythmic. The variations of a defiant ‘and ... and ... and’ and a schizophrenic ‘either ... or ... or’.

The artwork that finds its way into the following chapters does so at great violence to its project of disarticulation – its suspension between the articulate and the unspeakable. The theory that unravels each investigation of the artworks and processes addressed in this thesis is not what these works and processes are ‘about.’ It is, rather, its own encounter with the impossible, its own experiment. What is sought through this thesis is an event of suspension, an aporia in which one might be able to write that “[n]othing will enter memory, everything was on the lines, between the lines, in the AND that made one and the other imperceptible, without disjunction or conjunction but only a line of flight forever in the process of being drawn, toward a new acceptance, the opposite of renunciation or resignation - a new happiness...”⁸

⁸ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 207.

You theoreticians, know that you are mortal, and that theory is already death in you. Know this, be acquainted with your companion.

~ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

The task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate carries away, one after another, the barriers set by the writings of theorists and by the manifestos of the painters themselves.

~ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*

Introduction

The artists whose work forms the resonance of this composition were selected for a number of reasons, both sensible and superfluous. Perhaps of primary significance is the manner in which each artist addresses a specific aporia. Aporias generally involve an inclination to doubt or raise objections. This is not so much a skepticism as it is a gasp, a not-knowing-where-to-begin. The aporetic is, in this sense, the undecidable.

Mary Scott, a Calgary-based artist with an M.F.A. from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1980), has, since 1984, made work that investigates the difficulty inherent in presenting the feminine. Significantly influenced by the writings of feminist theorists and authors such as Luce Irigaray, Marguerite Duras, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and others, Scott's "quoting-in-excess" paintings (1984 - 1986) combine textual citation with advertising, soft porn and historical images embedded in layers of varnish, shellac, oil, Rhoplex, spray paint and powdered charcoal. In some cases the surface of the work is cut and peeled away in strips creating a violent and visceral tangle of words and silhouettes. This tangle of fragmented and syntactically altered sentences is, for Scott, a web of voices; "[i]n my use of text I try to have literally more than one speaker if possible."⁹ And yet these 'voices' remain paradoxically inaudible.

⁹ Mary Scott, interview first published in Bradley and Nemiroff, 134.

In 1986 Scott began a series of paintings devoted to the psychic phenomenon of imagoes. In this work Scott increasingly moved towards a material decomposition in which the paintings were “almost not there.” Meticulously unraveling silk and combining it with other materials (i.e.: thread, gold leaf, *etc.*), Scott began creating work that was effectively in ruins – ghosted by the unrepresentable (imagoes and otherness).

Similarly, the decision to include the work of John Murchie, artist, curator and former NSCAD librarian (1972 - 1990), also stems from the sense of ambiguity and hesitation that haunts his work. From a certain point of view he is, himself, like an awkwardly silent element within what might be called the discourse (if not the recent history) of NSCAD. There is a certain obscurity to his practice which, although prolific and familiar to those who were at the College from 1972 to 1990, remains largely unacknowledged - unheard (which is not the same as being totally silent).

Although Murchie's studio practice is diverse (video, performance, painting, sculpture, poetry and literature) it is, when not given over to an arbitrary rhetoric or whimsy (as in the adventures of Big Boy - a serial novel performed in weekly installments and accompanied by an emotional harmonium, 1999) governed by a principle of construction or a predetermined programme. Throughout his work simple, straightforward procedures paradoxically manifest the greatest randomness and chance, faltering in the same way that a line, drawn with the greatest precision a free hand can afford, tremors silently off course.

In a 1978 publication simply titled *Lines*, Murchie assembled fragments of text from a variety of literary sources (Kerouac, Nietzsche, Melville, William Carlos Williams, *etc.*) and combined them with his own passages of writing. Through the middle of this book, passing patiently between the lines of writing and between start and finish, ran a straight, hand-drawn line. “i believed there were tenuous relations between my lines below the line and other lines above.”¹⁰ Although the text was not selected programmatically, the line itself was drawn by following the aforementioned principle of drawing a line as straight as possible with a free hand. In its imperfection it both falls short of and exceeds the programme, a state that resonates in a phrase that appears late in the publication:

I would
 awkwardly
Silent be.¹¹

Eric Cameron, a colleague of Murchie’s at NSCAD whose practice is well known within the annals of Canadian art history, also creates objects that manifest an uncomfortable quiet or silence. Cameron is perhaps best known for his *Thick Paintings*: found, mundane objects that he laboriously covers in thousands of layers of gesso. The more layers of paint applied, the stranger and more bizarre the formations produced. As works they are continued indefinitely until some intervention prevents their completion, i.e.: sale or the artist’s death. Cameron’s continued adherence to a strict, predetermined programme of paint application (indeed, it is ritualised) demonstrates, in a notably pragmatic fashion,

¹⁰ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, 1999.

¹¹ John Murchie, *Lines* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Eye Level Gallery, 1978).

that even the most rigid forms of control and repetition only accelerate the return of chaos. Every uniform and meticulous brush stroke applied to his *Thick Paintings* returns like suppressed laughter in the form of strange growths that break the solitude of order.

Of greater importance to this thesis, and lesser familiarity in general, is the video work that Cameron made over a five-year period spent teaching at Guelph University (1972 – 1976). Following similar programmatic principles of construction, these videos were created with the realisation that “[i]t is not possible to pose a question like ‘What can you do with a television camera’ without in the same instant suppressing the pre-echoes of an obscene reply: ‘
 ”’.¹² The obscenity of this reply is perhaps its partiality, the infinity of silence reduced to a grammatical space flanked by quotation marks

Murchie, Cameron and Scott all produce work according to a particularly experimental process. This experimentation, so important to the framework of this thesis, is very different from the teleological procedures of scientific progress. Reducing it solely to the avant-garde category of ‘the new’ is, conversely, equally limited. In the context of this paper, experimentation functions less as a means of breaking with the past and moving progressively forward than, as John Cage once wrote, an action “the outcome of which is not foreseen.”¹³ This kind of experimentation is one best figured as a relationship with

¹² Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1994), 3.

¹³ John Cage, “Composition as Process Part II: Indeterminacy (1958),” *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Source Book of Artist’s Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles & Peter Selz (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), 707 – 708.

the impossible (whether this be understood as the inevitable or the random), and it has been presented most prominently in traditional North American art history through the work and legacy of several, distinct personas: Jackson Pollock, John Cage, Marcel Duchamp and Ad Reinhardt.

Pollock's drips, Cagean silence, the ready-made, and Reinhardt's last painting constitute four different valences of experimentation – gestures that tend to be organised according to a vast array of teleologies. What follows is not an overt interrogation of the validity of such organisations; they are in the end unavoidable, and perhaps necessary. There can be no doubting the recuperation of avant-garde artworks such as Duchamp's *Fountain* by the very system of signification that it was now mythically aimed against. Nonetheless, the ready-made still marks a particularly obscure movement within the art institution, a virus whose 'logic' always threatens to spill over on to foolish things: a discarded glove, a fire-extinguisher, a gallery chair or plant.

The three artists examined in this paper also share a part in the history of Canadian conceptualism and postminimal layer painting as it emerged from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the 1970s. While what follows is not a straightforward historical endeavor, it would be extremely unfortunate to neglect this connection entirely. This having been said, the positing of NSCAD as artistic origin is, for a number of methodological reasons, to be strictly avoided. Instead, the College will be treated as a discursive figure rather than a consciousness. While it is true that these artists were and still are disparately involved in a very specific artistic discourse, any material analysis /

criticism of this discourse, or the role played by these artists in it, must be left to those with stronger ideological or dialectical convictions.

The overarching theme of this thesis is the notion that it is possible for something that cannot be presented according to a set of pre-given rules to be, nonetheless, active within them. The unrepresentable is, in this case, a task and responsibility; it must be witnessed. This witnessing will be explored under the rubric of experimentation by following the repetitious, sometimes programmatic, sometimes rhetorical work of Mary Scott, Eric Cameron and John Murchie.

What is Sometimes Called Poststructuralism

If we were to seek for that crystallized moment in which something became so obvious that it ultimately disappeared we would learn nothing of the manner in which this vanishing was accomplished. Conversely, to solve such metaphysical closure by turning our project into the sensible delineation of a method of secrecy would be equally blind: a search for shade using the white light of language. Such a prospect brings to mind the Levinasian regret that “those who have worked on methodology all their lives have written many books that replace the more interesting books they could have written. So much the worse for philosophy that would walk in sunlight without shadows.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 89.

If we are to believe the assertions of the poststructural theories, observant, as they are, of Nietzsche, Bataille and others, then there is an event in every structure - whether it be methodological, philosophical, mathematical, biological, visual or linguistic - that is irreducible within the limits of that structure and threatens its very coherence. Derrida writes of this variously as the play of structurality, *parergon* and the *passe-partout* that “spaces itself without letting itself be framed” but which, nonetheless, “does not stand outside the frame.”¹⁵ Complicit in many regards with Derrida Spivak considers a similar disruption, “the falling apart of language” in rhetoric, and chastises Kristeva for attempting, under the rubric of the ‘presemiotic’, “to expand the empire of the meaningful by grasping at what language can only point at.”¹⁶ In favour of heterogeneity, Lyotard has also addressed structural disruption through the unrepresentable ideas, conflict and rupture of the Kantian sublime. In so doing he emphasises the importance of experimentation that works “without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done” and bears witness to the unrepresentable.¹⁷

It would be folly to assume that the above theorists, and others traditionally associated with them - Blanchot, Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari, and Irigaray, for example - are

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11-12.

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 187.

¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 80.

engaged in the same projects, that they all preach the same ruptured logos. "The same ... Same ... always the same."¹⁸ To do so would be to disregard the direction of their theory and the myriad of subtle, discrete lines that construct, entangle and interweave their work. And while these differences must be acknowledged, the poststructural as a coherent theoretical category cannot be ignored or dismissed. Quite often within the context of this category, those who would rather, as Levinas wrote, walk in sunlight without shadows, accuse the theory consolidated under its name of neglecting agency and making action seem impossible or futile.¹⁹ In short, this theory is considered guilty of fostering or feeding millennial apathy. To be fair, there is a marked penchant for such political inaction within the institutionalised, North American poststructural version. In this case, interrogating the depth-model becomes an excuse for lackadaisical, 'deconstructive' inertia - the same old trap of metaphysics.

Of the many North Americans to criticise poststructural theory in the last twenty years, Fredric Jameson is one of the most articulate. Like the categorical poststructuralism of the '80s that he criticised, however, he assumed that fragmentation weakened the unity of the subject, turning the world into "sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable."²⁰ In making this assumption he

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205.

¹⁹ In the introduction to the English translation of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse writes that derridian deconstruction is "purely epistemological", and that "... the question of the institutionalization of deconstruction as a social practice does not seem to interest Derrida" ("Foreword", *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv; see also, Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) and Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* (1984): 57.

accepted without quarrel, and against his personal inclination and wish for expression, that the alienated self had been supplanted entirely with a pure decentering. As such, Jameson is careless of the power that the bourgeois ego or monad wields in its pure 'end', especially within the cultural logic of Late Capitalism. The world has become chaos, but the subject remains as the image of the world.²¹

For Jameson the music of John Cage involves "a silence so intolerable that you cannot imagine another sonorous chord coming into existence, and cannot imagine remembering the previous one well enough to make any connection with it if it does."²² It is unfortunate that Jameson is so oblivious to the noise in silence - the inconsolable sounds that flow all around him, rising uncontrollably from himself and the others sitting next to him. The present writing is, among other things, about this kind of silence, a silence that cannot be kept, the silence of repetition whose flight programmatic and rhetorical experimentation follows. Such a text is thus, necessarily, unfaithful. Experimentation - its agency - is at once a failure and a betrayal of the 'outside', of silence. An attempt to explicate this 'outside' is an attempt to write in a language which, "presupposing itself as the totality of discourse, would spend itself all at once, disjoin and fragment endlessly."²³ This would be an impossible extreme, an excess of more and less that is both sublime and

²¹ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.

²² Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism...", 73.

²³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 29

ridiculous. And yet it is this impossibility of an 'outside' that experimentation performs, enacting it through its very absence, in the motions of its escape.

The current text is, therefore, nothing other than discourse. And while discourse unfolds according to rules of coherence and a presupposed unity of language that is incapable of silence, it also allows silence to show itself as that which it cannot keep. Writing occurs at the frontiers of knowledge, in that perilous space where discourse may be given over to, or carried off by, meaninglessness - neither absent nor present, but equivalent to zero. This is, in the words of Ad Reinhardt, something "too serious to be taken seriously."²⁴ Hence the farcical, somewhat ridiculous attitude of experimentation. While not all writing may be considered experimental, the act of writing is one irrevocably wound-up in the impossible possibility of keeping silence. This thesis, while presented in a coherent language, was and is written - that is, made/done - with this in mind, this thought that is in mind only as an awkward stuttering.

Experimentation and the Theories of the Avant-Garde

In its most common state a theory of the avant-garde is a rigid organisation of movements: active moments, stratified and ordered into a historical structure or social sub-system. These movements (Surrealism, Futurism, Cubism, Dadaism, *etc.*) and

²⁴ Ad Reinhardt, "An Interview With Ad Reinhardt", *Art as Art: Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 14.

moments (activist, antagonist, nihilist, agonist, *etc.*), rationally segmented and grouped, are distributed within a theoretical framework and made to constitute an anatomy - an organization that is meaningful only in relation to an institution or body (the autonomy of art, for example, or the avant-garde's own institutionalisation). A punctual system emerges as a specifically avant-garde family tree whose lines of decent join periods (historical, neo-, pre- / post-war), moments, starting points and futurist seeds.²⁵

On a more particulate, atomic level, a theory of the avant-garde is a collection of tendencies, predilections and generalities, i.e.: a block of manifestos, a group of organs (*The Dial*, *Criterion*, *Avalanche*, *Vanguard*, *Parallelogram*) and currents (paroxysme, intensism, sincerism, actionism, serial reductivism, eccentric abstraction). In this instance the theoretical divisions are of a finer, more confused character. Multiple lines traverse the theoretical structure like ditches and minor cracks, turning the avant-garde into a fragmented body whose relationship to anatomy is founded antagonistically. Fragmentation and plurality no longer involve a project that must derive meaning from, or becoming meaningful within an institution, and are instead the negation of meaning within an organisation (organism).

There is also a plane upon which a theory of the avant-garde acts like a theory of silence or the erotic - a farce that attempts to speak a language that equals zero.²⁶ This plane is

²⁵ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 71.

²⁶ The erotic relates to silence in that, according to Bataille, the erotic involves "a language that equals zero, a language equivalent to nothing at all, a language that returns to silence"; see Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 264.

the experimental plan (*plan*). Not experimentation in the sense of a teleological activity or revolutionary adventure at the frontiers of art, but a programmatic, sometimes nonsensical experimentation that might be considered gratuitous idiocy, in excess of or lacking meaning, e.g.: Tristan Tzara's recipe for composing a poem from a newspaper, William S. Burroughs' cut-ups, John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), Richard Serra's lead 'tearings' and 'splashes' (1968), Vito Acconci's *Trademarks* (1970), Gerald Ferguson's *Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage* (1970). The rupture that this type of experimentation introduces into a theory of the avant-garde is apparent in the inability of Peter Bürger to call Duchamp's *Fountain* a work of art. On an almost imperceptible level the ready-made somehow manages to escape whatever is to be encompassed or pinned down within the category 'work' and must instead be registered as a 'manifestation.' What this term is meant to designate within Bürger's text must be taken as either self-evident or ambiguous beyond comment. The discussion that follows its unqualified appearance does not justify its use, even within the paradox of an artwork that attacks its own status as work. This is perhaps because programmatic and nonsensical experimentation, much like the concepts repetition, passivity and the erotic, involve a language equivalent to nothing at all: "the suppression of whatever language may add to the world."²⁷ It is along these lines that a momentary escape from the discontinuities of the two previous organisations is possible. Bataille might have called such an escape a little death, indicating an event or transgression during which one gets carried away. In any case, it is no longer a question of an anatomy or a fragmented body,

²⁷ Ibid.

but instead of a *Body without Organs* (BwO). Experimentation is the BwO of the avant-garde.

The Body without Organs (BwO), or *Corps sans Organs*, is a concept that Deleuze and Guattari created and elaborated throughout the several books that they negotiated together. Put simply, it is one of many concepts through which the two thinkers formulate experimentation. In this case, the Body without Organs refers to an activity - a process of experimentation and flow of chance - that disorganises the body, that is, which renders the rigid segmentation of the body into organs, sections and appendages moot: the equivalent of being lost in work. At the same time, however, the Body without Organs is a construction, and must therefore be made (hence the double meaning of the French word *plan* which may be translated as both 'plan' and 'plane'). There are many kinds of Bodies without Organs. For instance, capital is the BwO of the capitalist being.²⁸ There is also an empty, fascist BwO and a BwO hardened by drug use. Most important of all is the joyful BwO. In this instance it is almost a counter-politics - a micropolitics and micrology - that causes imperceptible mutations to occur in the rigid divisions of society. This is the equivalent of being drunk on pure water and it is the possibilities of this type of BwO, its potential as a task, construction and micropolitics, which is the focus of this text.

²⁸ See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 10.

The three bodies of the avant-garde (the anatomical body, the fragmented body, the Body without Organs) are not separate. In fact, all three can be present at once, though with varying degrees of perceptibility, within a single movement, theory, individual or work of art. Poggioli, for instance, constructs a scientific anatomy of the avant-garde that is inhabited and fragmented by avant-garde currents and tendencies and which is also silently infected with the 'problem' of programmatic experimentation. "Experimentalism so conceived is at once a stepping stone to something else and is gratuitous."²⁹ Even the densely anatomical text of Peter Bürger cannot entirely squelch the possibility of an indefinite, disorganised body that remains in his spontaneous use of the word 'manifestation' in place of 'work'. At the same time, it must not be overlooked that he also finds within *Fountain* the lines of an anatomy, "[i]t is only in relation to the category 'work of art' that Duchamp's ready-mades make sense,"³⁰ and a fragmented body, "[i]n so far as the work is a part of that institution, the attack is also directed against it."³¹

"The experimental factor in avant-gardism is obvious to anyone having even a summary knowledge of the course of contemporary art."³² Almost too obvious for words. The latter is indeed the case when one considers the lack of exegesis that this 'factor' has received within the theories of the avant-garde. With the exception of Poggioli and Lyotard experimentation is, for the most part, left to function nominally or else as an adjective within the more prominent narratives of negation, novelty and struggle. In short, it is

²⁹ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 135.

³⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 56.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³² Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 131.

symptomatic, a clue to the larger 'syndrome' of avant-gardism or else an indication of avant-garde illness and failure. The latter scenario is most prominently the case in the theories of Bürger and Habermas for whom the avant-garde of late capitalism is nothing but a failed or "nonsense experiment."³³ Even Hal Foster, in his admirable attempt to wrestle a theory of the avant-garde from the grip of Marxism and the cult of failure, treats experimentation as no more than a motif.³⁴

"Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment', but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence."³⁵ There are phrases within *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* that, in the words of Eric Cameron, "cry out to be rescued from the rest."³⁶ Greenberg is one of those thoughtful writers who, despite his rigid intentions, creates rich and malleable concepts. Indeed, much of the art work produced in North America after the '50s can be grouped into a collection of Greenbergian concepts that 'got away,' or which at the very least found a path along which escape might be possible. The crudity of such a grouping is not important; it is only one of many ways to anatomise the neo-avant-garde.³⁷ The irony of Greenberg's sentence is that 'to find a path' is

³³ See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 3 - 15.

³⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (London & Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 22 - 32.

³⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 5.

³⁶ Eric Cameron, *Bent Axis Approach: Installation and Essay* (Calgary: The Nickel Arts Museum, 1984), 1.

³⁷ The neo-avant-garde is a particularly difficult term. It is part of what this paper has already designated an anatomy of the avant-garde, and is included amongst adjectives and prefixes such as: historical, pre-, post-, trans-, etc.. The use of the term avant-garde is more or less consistent throughout the text. This is in keeping with the understanding of the avant-garde as a composition of fine and complex lines, and not

nothing less than an experimental project. Rhetorical and programmatic experimentation involve path-movements, what Deleuze and Guattari call “lines of flight.”³⁸ Contrary to Greenberg’s use of the word path, experimentation in the sense of this line (the Body without Organs of programmatic or nonsensical experimentation) does not blaze a cultural trail, or even crack up culture’s autonomous visage. It is quite the opposite of this; along it culture leaks from its segments and pores, releasing little, experimental currents and flows: puns and formulas running an escape route, facilitating divisions that seem just to elude the eye,³⁹ reducing the head to a single line.⁴⁰ Running is a double entendre. One flees along the path by running, but one also constructs or lays it in the same manner. These are two different and distinct things that do the same; they are the same procedure done twice. “What comes to pass on the BwO is not exactly the same as how you make yourself one. However, one is included in the other.”⁴¹

Poggioli tells us that one of the most important aspects of avant-garde poetics is experimentalism.⁴² It is quite obvious, however, that in writing this he intends experimentation to be understood as an activity grounded teleologically in an ‘authentic experience.’ Nevertheless, Poggioli warrants a generous reading. All too often his work is defined and dismissed as a rather inadequate theory of negative culture. This is

simply the larger segments of its history. This should not be interpreted as a stark rejection of the historical / neo-avant-garde paradigm, but as a complication of its simple, pretentiously totalising sweep.

³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

³⁹ “I have seen a painting by Reinhardt badly marked with scratches of fingernails as people tried to detect by touch the existence of divisions that seem just to elude the eye,” Eric Cameron, *Bent Axis Approach*, 11.

⁴⁰ Marcel Duchamp, *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

⁴¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 152.

⁴² Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.

unfortunate, given his admirable delineation of the aforementioned avant-garde bodies. The most immediate criticism that could be made of *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968) might be that it is trapped in the rigidities of pseudo-science and an aspiration to objectivity. This having been said, it is perhaps because Poggioli treated his work, however limited, as an “investigation scientific in character”⁴³ that he was able to go as far as he did.

The worst that can be said of Poggioli is that he took no risks. His theory is, without doubt, a homage to the lucid control of scientific inquiry rather than the uncertainty of chance or goal-less experimentation. Science is serious stuff; there is no time for messing around. “Avant-garde experimentalism must be observed in its more common and current manifestations, not only in such absurd and extreme extravagances.”⁴⁴ This view of programmatic experimentation as ‘extravagant’ would account for Poggioli’s tendency to see it as little more than novelty and no less than dangerous – when it is not harmful, it is useless or extraneous to art.⁴⁵ Quite unexpectedly, however, Poggioli accepts into his theory the premises of programmatic experimentation at the very moment he denounces them.⁴⁶ The event of an avant-garde Body without Organs - an activity that is also a path or means of escape (in the sense of running lines) - enters *The Theory of the Avant-garde* when Poggioli writes, “rhetorical and programmatic avantgardism is now an all-too-open

⁴³ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of the Chicago Press, 1978), 280.

door, and it leads on to a void and a desert”⁴⁷ – what Lyotard once called the desert of thought.⁴⁸

Experimentation of this type weighs heavily upon Poggioli’s sense of organization and structure, especially since he is astute enough to realise that any fundamental ground or centre of the avant-garde cannot be free from the caprice of its game. This anxiety corresponds to what Derrida once hesitatingly termed an ‘event’ or ‘rupture’ within the human sciences: the moment at which it became “necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of a present being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed location but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of substitutions came into play.”⁴⁹ The mark of this ‘event’ is evident when Poggioli address the possible or predicted liquidation of the avant-garde. “If there has been an overcoming,” Poggioli writes, “it consists of the felicitous transition of the avant-garde in the strictest sense to an avant-garde in the broad sense; of a defeat in the letter and a victory in the spirit of avant-gardism. The onetime fever is, bit by bit, yielding to a controlled lucidity.”⁵⁰

At the behest of this ‘rupture’, Poggioli is led to believe that the avant-garde is a ‘group manifestation.’ This is, of course, true along certain lines - the lines of an anatomy, for instance, or filiation. Avant-garde groups are definitely a family affair. This is obvious in

⁴⁷ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 225.

⁴⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 91.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 280.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 223.

the workings of the school/movement and old-/new-generation oppositions. Old movements retire in groups to schools (“old-fashioned regroupings”)⁵¹ while their descendants form modern families. After all, “[y]ou can't lug the corpse of your father all over the place.”⁵²

At the same time, however, Poggioli understands “... the difficulty or impossibility of labeling as avant-garde movements those cultural currents which are purely ideological or idea-oriented (unconcerned with form), such as the French called *unanisme* and *populisme*.”⁵³ To these more “vast and vague cultural manifestations” Poggioli gives the name “current”, which designates “vital forces, intuitive and unconscious elements, tendencies rather than groups.”⁵⁴ The current is a matter of packs and swarms, not groups, and, as a result, it is not a familial entity. In fact it is not really an entity at all and functions instead as an inclination. “Thus its validity is limited to generalized and unstable orientations, cultural situations more in potential than in execution, to tendencies in a fluid or raw state.”⁵⁵ The pack does not filiate and sometimes lasts only a day or a night. It does not procreate; it infects, spreading quickly, and then just as quickly dissipating or disappearing (returning to the void or the desert). The pack is a fragmented body; it does not move, but swarms. It is at this swarming level that a body without organs constructs itself, constituted through a micropolitics of experimentation.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Guillaume Apollinaire, as quoted by Renato Poggioli, 35.

⁵³ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

In its history the avant-garde is ordered and articulated, belonging within a structure as an invariable presence. In its manifestos it is anti-articulation, anti-order; the negation of its very existence in a heterogeneous collection of organs. In its 'manifestations' it is, finally, disarticulate; "its labor is an eternal web of Penelope, with the weave of its forms remade everyday and unmade every night."⁵⁶ Disorganised, the body flees into the void where it will either vanish or be reterritorialised as a skeleton: "only the laughing bones remain, flesh over the hills and far away with the dawn wind and a train whistle."⁵⁷

As Bürger so disparagingly observes, "it will never be possible to seize the meaning being searched for in chance events, because, once defined, it would become part of means-ends rationality and thus lose its value as social protest."⁵⁸ And so programmatic experimentation and rhetorical avantgardism are 'doomed' to repetition, yet this repetition is the very possibility of freedom - which is an encounter with death - presented as an impossible experience, as a preparation for / expectation of the unrealizable that can only be manifested, enacted, in its impossibility, only presented as dying, failing or turning back. At the level of the Body without Organs the avant-garde is nothing but failure, but it is a full failure and not a negative one.

⁵⁶ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 82

⁵⁷ William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 108.

⁵⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 66.

Chapter One

Extra-Ordinary: A Politics of the Inconsequential

What's he building in there?

What's he building in there?

We have a right to know...⁵⁹

A world that continues to believe that the ordinary is a useless politics will be forever confined to it. We all have our secret land of 'no one,' our body without organs, our rhizome, our own private schizophrenia. Some people insist that they don't, and perhaps they are right. It is very hard to keep this secret, especially when the social world so vehemently insists that what transpires in this land must be expressed in some way, that is, made proper and public. Society's 'right to know' seems at all times to be more important than the right to remain separate. "If you are not public you disappear; if not exposed as much as possible, you don't exist. Your no-man's-land is interesting only if expressed and communicated. Heavy pressures are put on silence, to give birth to expression."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Tom Waits, "What's He Building?," *Mule Variations* (Jalma Music, 1999).

⁶⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 120.

Our secret region, what Lyotard calls our “secret existence,” is very ordinary. We all have it, and if the social order has made access to it difficult – “There are no voices in my head. I say what I think!” – it still waits for us. In fact, this separate region is more than ordinary. It is extra ordinary. And that is why the “powers that be” would rather not believe in it and instead dismiss it as useless, selfish, redundant and, in the extreme, abnormal. The social apparati of art follow suit asking how such a creative land, or perhaps we should call it a heterogeneous encounter, can be effective – how can it be properly political? Where is the agency in isolation?

“Just because you don’t have to answer to others with regard to what goes on in this region, it does not follow that you are irresponsible.”⁶¹ Lyotard writes that solitude is *sedition*.⁶² This assertion is obviously at variance with the more popular notions of political activity that understand sedition in terms of public acts – social interventions. But if doing things alone and in isolation is so ineffective it serves to wonder why there are, and have been, so many prohibitions against it. Not the least of which is the lie that such isolation does not constitute an ethics or a politics. Women of the 18th and 19th centuries, for example, were not to be left alone because it was believed that they were prone, if unsupervised, to commit the most heinous social infractions (prostitution, *etc.*). Children likewise are never to be left alone or, as it is commonly said, “left to their vices.” The adolescent alone in a bedroom is the perfect picture of anti-social behavior (masturbation and private acts of defiance). And what is Confession but the attempt to

⁶¹ Ibid., 117.

⁶² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 201.

remedy the mind's unhappy tendency to wander into a secret world of heterogeneous permission. Society is absolutely riven with invocations against solitude and its selfishness. Our greatest social nightmares involve confrontations with loneliness or the results of someone else's mad pursuits in that prohibited and romantic region. "Deep loneliness is sublime but in a way that stirs terror."⁶³ A secret existence is radical politics because it is out of order and separate. For what other reason would we put criminals and the insane in isolation (solitary confinement) than to mark them as the threshold of the inhuman?

An artist who makes work alone and then shows it is a genius. Conversely, an artist who makes work alone, or in rural areas, and does not show it, or only shows it only sporadically and to a small audience, is either naïve or not very good. We assume such artists are very ordinary – even if we understand them to be raving lunatics – and not worth noting. They are of little consequence, we think, minor. In fact, for the sake of scholarship, authority, distinction and a whole array of standards, it is often important that one not notice them. Doing otherwise could have catastrophic results – you might isolate yourself. This is what is extra-ordinary about inconsequential art (parergon). It says "don't notice me it will ruin everything." It is not part of the social picture; it is ob-scene.

⁶³ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1960), 48.

An artist, like John Murchie for instance, who has no interest in being anything more or less than inconsequential – “appreciated by so few” – is at once ordinary and strange. His work is in the middle, not as an average, but as a between “that does not designate a localizable relation going from one to the other reciprocally...”⁶⁴ One wanders in the middle and gets carried away. This is something that Murchie admits to continually, that he has a tendency to ramble and that there is a multiplicity of things to do rather than one overarching task. His studio is, as such, an assemblage of projects that he wanders between, sometimes writing, and other times adding a few coats of paint to the match sticks that he methodically covers or, the *Monument to Inequality* that he has been working on since 1994 (see figure 1).⁶⁵

“[N]ot usually much interested in intentions as in actions,”⁶⁶ Murchie sustains a pragmatic creative practice that tends to be more interested in ‘how’ than in ‘what.’ How can art “discover an adequate outside, an outside with which it can establish heterogeneous connections, rather than a world to reproduce?”⁶⁷ Perhaps Murchie’s answer would be by rambling, by inconsequence, by simply drawing lines that are “so powerful and so ordinary.”⁶⁸ This is only conjecture. Murchie does not, in his creative practice – his ‘no-man’s-land’ – answer to any one. Although, like Duchamp, he seems

⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the line*, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotexte(e), 1983), 58.

⁶⁵ *Monument to Inequality* consists of a series of sculptures formed by layering paint between pieces of New Brunswick pine shim.

⁶⁶ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, electronic mail, October 22, 1999.

⁶⁷ Deleuze & Guattari, *On the Line*, 55.

⁶⁸ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, October 2, 1999.

happy to supply any information he can to those who ask him politely.⁶⁹ And this is perhaps what is, in isolation, so terrifying to society: it answers to no One, it marks the movement of the inhuman.

*Why would we have the right to freedom of expression if we had nothing to say but the already said? And how can we have any chance of finding out how to say what we know not how to say if we do not listen to the silence of the other within?*⁷⁰

If we are to respect this inhuman movement in the extra-ordinary and the inconsequential (the other within), instead of expressing it, it must be in a way that is open to its heterogeneity, its “perpendicular direction, a transversal movement carrying away one *and* the other, a stream without beginning or end, gnawing away at its two banks and picking up speed in the middle.”⁷¹ Experimentation is in this sense a politics of secrets. An artist who works without consequence preserves “the inhuman region in which we can meet this or that which completely escapes the exercise of rights.”⁷² This is to preserve the ellipsis that follows the demand “we have a right to know,” and which stands in for that which we can never know.

⁶⁹ This sentiment, attributed to Marcel Duchamp, appeared on the front of the invitations to John Murchie's 1978 exhibition at Eye Level Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

⁷⁰ Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 121 –122.

⁷¹ Deleuze & Guattari, *On the Line*, 58.

⁷² Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 121.

There's Something Funny Going On Here ...

Much of John Murchie's work asks the question, "why not laugh?" Or rather, why should we ignore whatever tugs at us to be simply enthralled, giddy, even foolish? Why settle for the insular, coy satisfaction of irony when it is the comic that attracts us? Perhaps we so quickly prefer irony because it presents us with the possibility, however sly or unspoken, of comprehension (understanding and inclusion). Legitimate because it is reserved, even elevated (highbrow humour), irony is in fact itself a form of legitimation. As a kind of secret, cynical, (post)modern circle, irony examines while concealing what it knows. As such the real irony of irony is that the knowledge in which one is supposed to be complicit is nothing but an insinuation. The content of irony is concealed by irony itself. The horror of the ironic might therefore be phrased in the following way: I know what you mean (smile), you mean ... *nothing*. And yet this irony of irony is what the ironic clings to; it makes the terror of uncertainty tangible even as it wipes it away. Irony, in this sense, is the empty body of the unrepresentable, the cleanliness of a gravestone - what Hegel once called the infinite judgment: "the spirit is a bone."⁷³ Comedic laughter, on the other hand, is vile excess; it signifies a corporeal pleasure that belongs to the domain of the sensual. Its relationship with nothing, with death, infinity and all that is serious, is of a much more dubious nature. And while laughter cannot be said to be a token of respect, it certainly knows the horror of the unrepresentable which it presents through deprivation ... even depravity.

⁷³ See Slavoj Žižek's treatment of the Hegelian sublime in "Not Only as *Substance*, but Also as *Subject*," *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989), 201-231.

“The ludicrous,” according to Aristotle, “is a failing or a piece of ugliness which causes no pain or destruction; thus, to go no farther, the comic mask is something ugly and distorted but painless.”⁷⁴ Things become funny where our belief in pain, and, in the extreme, the inevitability of death has been momentarily suspended (e.g.: cartoon death). As such, laughter is a compromise, like kitsch, which we often call laughable; “it denies the movement of death by imposing the stasis of an eternal death.”⁷⁵ By the same token, inasmuch as something is unimaginable or impossible (e.g.: immortality, infinity, nothingness), laughter involves a form of recognition far too serious to be taken seriously. Before foolishness, idiocy, pointlessness and buffoonery we come close to those impossibles whose magnitude causes us to recoil in a spasm of laughter or a shudder of fear. In doing foolish things we follow the impossible - the cosmic - in its flight, but in a pragmatic fashion and not through the remove of metaphysics. “By this halt of Time, fools mean Eternity, but in truth it is perfect Nothingness, and absolute death, for on the contrary life is born only from an uninterrupted death (if one were to take these ideas seriously, they would lead promptly to the madhouse, but, as for myself, I take them only for foolishness ...).”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1967), 23 - 24.

⁷⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 1993), 144.

⁷⁶ Boneventura quoted by Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: Univeristy of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

In 1997 John Murchie curated an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia with the lighthearted title, *Working Papers have a good time*.⁷⁷ The final paragraph of the brief text that accompanied this show, both in the form of a small publication and as a wall text, entreated its viewers to “not only beware but *have a good time*.”⁷⁸ With this simple injunction the exhibition hoped to provide a forum for the efforts of a diverse group of primarily NSCAD artists who frequently and multifariously employed paper in their creative practice. Of equal importance to the forum was the artists’ incorporation of “various modes of humour” in that same practice. The invocation to ‘have a good time’ was not out of step with Murchie’s previous curatorial activities, a job that he has, on occasion, likened to that of a ‘ringmaster’ rather than a ‘gatekeeper’. Such a simple, straightforward dictate is, however, one so rarely encountered in cultural institutions - we are very seldom given explicit permission to enjoy ourselves in a gallery - that it has a tendency to eclipse the antecedent request: beware.

Perhaps this simple ‘beware’ might be read in expanded form as: “beware of what is fun because it is through laughter that we often experience the most significant gravity.” And yet such an extrapolation remains only a possible variation. There is, nonetheless, something of eternity in laughter that is often so perilously close to a wail or sob. Fun has, at all times, the potential to become a disaster, and it is along this tenuous line that it gains in intensity and subsequently joy. Often in an encounter with the unrepresentable it is

⁷⁷ *Working Papers have a good time*, curator John Murchie (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1987); the show featured work by Amy Baker, Liz Bolton, Stephen Clayton Ellwood, Moritz Gaede, Garry Neill Kennedy, Ted McInnes, Terry Piercey, Lucy Pullen, Marina Roy, Charmaine Wheatley, Mitchell Wiebe, Ward Williamson, Detta Morrison Philips and Susan Wood.

⁷⁸ John Murchie, *Working Papers*.

more difficult *not to laugh* - not to shudder in some way as we are abruptly turned back. Hence the compromise of which Bataille writes when addressing the smutty laughter elicited by the erotic.⁷⁹ Echoing in the laughter that this deprivation induces is - perhaps - the impossible cry of silence. Laughter signifies that something happened where there could have been nothing, which is to say at the same time, that what happened “couldn’t possibly belong to the order of things which comes to pass, or which are important, but is rather among the things which export and deport.”⁸⁰

In a 2000 essay, “On Making a Substantial Art,” which was written for the Garry Neill Kennedy retrospective organised by the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and the National Gallery of Canada, Murchie once again relates art to a sense of terror or wariness. In one of several personal anecdotes inserted into the main body of the text Murchie describes watching, unobserved from his window across the street, as the former NSCAD president worked diligently in his studio, presumably adding layers to the paintings that he was busy making at that time (c. 1978). What Murchie observed through his window pane reminded him of the words of Igor Stravinsky: “a sort of terror when ... finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that anything is permissible to me ... if nothing offers me any resistance, then any effort is inconceivable ... and consequently every undertaking becomes futile.”⁸¹ While looking

⁷⁹ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 266–267.

⁸⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 9

⁸¹ John Murchie, “On Making a Substantial Art,” *Garry Neill Kennedy: Work of Four Decades* (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia & National Gallery of Canada, 2000), 154.

out his window twenty years ago Murchie felt that he had “witnessed something of that sort, perhaps not ‘terror’ but something.”⁸²

In the profusion of possibilities that overwhelmed him, Stravinsky recognised what the movements of art so often forget - the possibility of nothing happening, of art being swallowed up by its own permissiveness. The ‘something’ almost indiscernible that Murchie felt he had witnessed in Kennedy's studio is perhaps akin to this, the fear that an artist feels when faced with the blank medium, but also “every time something has to be waited for,” thus forming “a question at every point of questioning, at every ‘and what now?’”⁸³ These question marks are like a kind of music that follows us until we die, a noise that will continue long after we have been finally delivered to silence. And so this ‘now’ of the ‘and what now?’ - what Lyotard calls the nothingness now, “now like the feeling that nothing might happen”⁸⁴ - is all the more tragic and absurd. As the sound of our own finality - a nervous system in our ears⁸⁵ - it makes most things seem laughable. If we find humour in art it is, oftentimes, because taking it seriously would be overwhelming. Where there is laughter there is also the joyful terror of silence. Experimentation chases this solitude in the name of privation, of fullness through loss. And so we laugh out of a disbelief that makes silence possible as loss. In laughter we ‘lose it’, we ‘just about die.’

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 92.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 8.

*For at this point I have
much to be silent about.*
Friedrich Nietzsche, 1887

*It is a funny world.*⁸⁶

The Secret Life of John Murchie's Hammer

A secret hides in the frame of invention. In writing this the notion that experimentation is a container/concealer of the unrepresentable is meant to be drawn out - sketched as a diagram, a direction, a task, perhaps a betrayal. "The witness is a traitor."⁸⁷ If a secret is to be defined as "a content that has hidden its form in favour of a simple container,"⁸⁸ experimentation is secretive in two directions. These two movements may, of course, accidentally interrupt the course of the secret, but remain nonetheless an essential part of it: 1) through a straightforward transparency which tells all, and which, in its explicitness, *leaves nothing to the imagination* (let's see how far we can go) and 2) through a breached solitude, a partial disclosure that peeks out over the edge of the container and presents an obscurity that *overwhelms the imagination* (let's pick this apart carefully).⁸⁹ "The stratagem of the secret is either to show itself, to make itself so visible that it isn't seen (to disappear, that is, as a secret) or to hint that the secret is only a secret where there is

⁸⁶ John Murchie, *Lines* (Halifax: Eye Level Galley, 1979).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 204.

⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 287.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 290.

no secret, or no appearance of any secret.”⁹⁰ Experimentation, as an activity that attends to (waits on) and thus bears witness to the unforeseen, the indeterminate, the secret, swims through all these “contradictions which can then leave one quietly to the side.”⁹¹ It moves until it is blocked (speed and transparency) or else by trial and error (sobriety and obscurity).

*Murchie ... added a breath of fresh air and a little life to a pretty dull show. His piece, 'The Secret Life of John Murchie's Hammer', was one of my favorites. It was just fun.*⁹²

During the third annual Fine Arts faculty and staff exhibition held at the Owens Art Gallery of Mount Allison University, 1992, John Murchie exhibited a work that consisted of a snap-shot of a hammer placed in the centre of a large mirror with the phrase “the secret life of John Murchie’s hammer” spelled out in vinyl lettering across the top edge.⁹³ Propped casually against the wall, the mirror reflected the images of the gallery spectators milling about, as well as the work of the other faculty and staff members in the show. The disconcertingly ambiguous insertion of the hammer and its title into these

⁹⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 137.

⁹¹ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, electronic mail, November 23, 1999.

⁹² Steven Madsen, “F.A. Faculty Show a Disappointment,” *The Argosy*, Mount Allison University, Thursday, October 1, 1992.

⁹³ Sometime during 1992, John Murchie installed along the property fence of Cranewood, the official residence of the president of Mount Allison University (at that time, Ian Newbould), a mural playfully titled, *Sackville Boogie Woogie*. The mural consisted of several ducks, the long-time tourist mascot and theme of Sackville, New Brunswick, painted in colours particular to Mondrian over individual pieces of wood which had been laid together to form a consistent ground, and then separated and nailed over the gaps in the fence. Upon completing the installation of this mural, Murchie absentmindedly forgot his hammer at Cranewood. Some time latter, while helping Ian and Carla Newbould with a different project, Murchie discovered his lost hammer on the counter and took it home. In a strange twist to an otherwise ordinary set of events, Murchie subsequently received in the mail an anonymous photograph of his hammer sitting on the counter at Cranewood. Amusingly, on the back of the photo were the words, “the secret life of John Murchie’s hammer.” As it turned out, Carla Newbould had found the anomalous photo, taken as if by accident, at the end of a roll of film, and had sent it to Murchie with the said inscription.

reflections shattered their integrity with an obscure insinuation. The implication was that a barely concealed, although not quite apparent obscenity might be hiding somewhere in the secret life of the hammer. The possibility of this discrete indiscretion oozed and secreted itself - its infinite potential - into the forms that surrounded it. Like an oblivion that passed as *something* else, it had no specific content or meaning, but gave the appearance of one, as a sort of empty gesture. The 'breath of fresh air' that such a simple obscurity breathes could just as easily seem foul; the smell of a hidden, unimaginable silence, of life sprung from randomness, of rambling as experimentation. Silence becomes an infestation. There is a strange sobriety in this, a gravity that elicits seriousness as delight or paranoia, a deprivation that produces joy and disgust (What exactly is he insinuating?). In retrospect, Murchie admits rather amusedly that he was "just trying to be a nuisance."⁹⁴

There is, in general, something secretive about John Murchie's work, both as an activity and as an *oeuvre*. In some ways his position within the institutional framework of Canadian art, and particularly the programmatic conceptualism that emerged from NSCAD during his time there, resembles a strange parody of his creative practices: too obvious for words. He is not what one would readily call a prominent artist, at least not if one were using accolade or lip service as criteria. This is of no consequence. It matters little whether the world knows the nature of John Murchie's art, because in a very important way his art becomes a world. Not for 'you' (the other) or 'I' (the self), but in the manner of something so inconsequential - "a tiny drop in an ocean of oceans", "a

⁹⁴ John Murchie, interviewed by Emily Falvey, August 15, 1999.

speck on a speck on a speck”⁹⁵ - as to be without measure: it blends into the wall, but the wall has come alive.⁹⁶ There is no secret, which is precisely why it seems so obscure. *The Secret Life of John Murchie's Hammer* is perhaps meaningless. This meaninglessness may be taken as a simple delight with the world (just fun), or as the multiplication of possible meanings that raises the implied secret from the level of a game to a paranoid frenzy (And what exactly is he saying about the rest of the work in the show? He's guilty of some equivocal thought, but anything is possible ... he's guilty of *everything*).

Along a particular vein, *The Secret Life of John Murchie's Hammer* is a work that attests to all “the delights of the world which are just plain old little actual things.”⁹⁷ It is a child's secret concealed in a plain box, a story hidden in a commonplace envelope. Another line of thought elevates this simple jest to the level of infinity. The hammer becomes the emblem of a sublime guilt, it could mean anything, it could be guilty of anything; it is infinitely culpable. At such a height the whole world is implicated in its indiscernible, secret life. Indeed, it is as if this secret life were a world of its own. In a third, and perhaps most important way, *The Secret Life of John Murchie's Hammer* presents us with a kind of behaviour that withdraws from itself, which attends to the random details of life that leave ‘one quietly to the side.’ Such work hangs in the middle, suspended between the envelope of the ironic (Duchamp and the ready-made) and the empty distortions of simulacra (Warhol and *Hammer and Sickle*, *Still Life*, 1977). In this

⁹⁵ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, November 22, 1999 & October 17, 1999.

⁹⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *On the line*, 75.

⁹⁷ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, October 2, 1999.

ambivalent, ambiguous middle, between profound and stupid, childlike and paranoid. John Murchie's hammer hesitates in a secretive interval ... an 'and' (and what now?). A secret remains an indeterminate movement of chance, of silence. Helped by that movement, in a potentially bewildering encounter with a material, witnessing becomes an oeuvre.⁹⁸ And what better way to bear witness to a secret than quietly and with very little recognition.

*it's not even a speck on a speck on a speck. in the end what can you say? and, silence seems often the better part of graciousness.*⁹⁹

And Lines?

John Murchie spends time in between, keeping busy with the patience of 'and' and the hesitation of 'perhaps' – "there is always the perhaps and surely also always the and."¹⁰⁰ He frequently observes that there are "too many things here and there to only be doing some one thing,"¹⁰¹ that he has, perhaps, just made a "rambling digression there" and that he shall, of course, "ramble."¹⁰² Sometimes one just comes upon things.

⁹⁸ Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 203.

⁹⁹ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, November 22, 1999.

¹⁰⁰ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, electronic mail, October 24, 1999.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

In 1972 Murchie came upon the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He notes retrospectively that before being hired as the college librarian he, along with a certain portion of Halifax, regarded the ‘shenanigans’ at NSCAD to be ridiculous. “Our mockery was fueled both by ignorance and by rumours of the exceedingly strange behaviours, artistic and otherwise, of those associated with the Art College.”¹⁰³ Despite these assumptions, Murchie was equally convinced of the pretentious foolishness of ‘50s abstraction. When he began work at NSCAD he was “overwhelmed, even dazzled” by the work of Gerald Ferguson. “During the 1970s Ferguson’s work was everywhere to be seen around NSCAD and suggested to me that the visual arts did indeed have potential to be more than pretty decorations, maybe even to compete with the intellectual and emotive capacities of literary texts.”¹⁰⁴

Impressed by Ferguson’s *The Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage Arranged by Word Length and Alphabetized Within Word Length* (1970), as well as the work of Pat Kelly and others, Murchie began to play with ‘the question of art.’ “I mean by *play*, of course, the sense of amusing oneself but also the sense of freedom. I do not mean play as in horsing around or indulgence, although those are the slight semantic shifts which are potential in both the word and the art.”¹⁰⁵ In 1972, he produced *A Rebours* whose title is taken from Huysmans’ turn-of-the-century novel (the English translation of this title is ‘against the grain’). The work consisted of a long, rectangular

¹⁰³ John Murchie, “On Making a Substantial Art,” 150.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ John Murchie, *The 100,000 Names of Art, Cliff Eyland* (Halifax: Saint Mary’s University Art Gallery), 1992.

piece of wood with lines cut vertically against the grain at one-inch intervals across its surface; the title of the work was painted in the upper right-hand corner. This work marked a transition in Murchie's practice that had, up to that point, consisted of woodcarving. Soon after this shift he began experimenting with lines - a project which, among many, continues to sustain his interest, although inconsistently and in a variety of ways.

Murchie's earliest projects involved drawing straight lines with a black, felt-tip marker until a predetermined area of paper had been filled (*see figure 2*). Each of the lines was drawn freehand following a simple programme: be as straight as possible without using a straightedge or ruler. Naturally variables such as the thickness of the paper, the tremor of the artist's hand and the quantity of ink in the marker interceded. In the residue of this straightforward and rather confining programme a resonant sense of ambiguity and inconsistency was manifest. The lines quiver and warp, the ink tapers and is depleted – everything is still and yet it all moves. Murchie also followed a similar set of dictates in his experimentation with paint. Loading up a brush with pigment he applied it to the canvas in as straight and even a line as possible, drawing it out until the brush came clean. As with the marker, the lines displayed the most profound inconsistencies, each waned into a dash, almost as if it were in the process of fleeing the surface of the painting, and perhaps painting in general (*see figure 3*).

In a later scenario Murchie tried to make a vertical line as a space between two sets of horizontal lines. Loading his brush as previously and drawing it out clean in one

direction, he tried to make a series of lines that began at the same point and thus formed an edge. He then left a space and did the same in the opposite direction. In this project the object was twofold: 1) make two series of horizontal lines as straight as possible with a freehand so that they proceed in opposite directions from a vertical space on the page which will 2) itself become a line made as straight as possible following the aforesaid programme. During these tests Murchie became increasingly interested in the corporeality of paint - its 'body' - which he noticed had the ability to be both flat, as was stereotypically desired by formalism, and sculptural, which was in keeping with the spatial developments made by minimalism.

It would, of course, be historical folly to try to posit who had historical precedence among the NSCAD layer painters. In a 1983 interview with Cliff Eyland, Eric Cameron, perhaps the best known of the group remarked, "[o]f course there have been several people around the college ... who have done layer paintings."¹⁰⁶ The interview then goes on to cite the influences of Jeff Spalding, Partrick Kelly, Bruce Campbell and Garry Neill Kennedy. Murchie is absent, despite the influence (acknowledged by Cameron in conversation) that his experiments with the substance of paint may have had on the commencement of the Thick Paintings.¹⁰⁷ As has already been observed, Murchie's practice is subtle and quiet. "i have yet to be convinced that the perfect life would not be one which leaves the world completely unchanged. one in which no noise was made."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Eric Cameron, "The Object of Paint," *Vanguard* (Septembr: 1983), 24-25.

¹⁰⁷ Eric Cameron was influenced specifically by Murchie's Eyelevel Gallery show, *Chance and Choice: Three Works From Infinite Possibilities*, c. 1978.

¹⁰⁸ John Murchie, Sackville, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, November 22, 1999.

Fascinated with the possibility of making an object from paint - a painting that was at the same time sculptural, or rather, between the two - Murchie began to consider "the stupidly fundamental questions pertaining to the rules of making a painting; of deriving material reality, an image, from coloured fluid."¹⁰⁹ The lines persisted. In the annual NSCAD Student, Staff, Alumni exhibition (c. 1982) at the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Murchie exhibited several paintings on narrow, balsawood panels that stood out from the wall and leaned against it like sculptures. On these strips he had once again attempted to make a straight line in the form of a vertical space by drawing two sets of brush strokes in opposite directions in a horizontal series. In this instance, however, the strokes were shorter and layered so that they began to manifest a geography of bumps and ridges, ravines and hills. Lines of flow and run-off appeared surrounding tiny islands of accreted paint. Once again a strange, static movement infused the painting: the flux of a motion made possible by stillness. The lines-as-space veered off to one side more or less, forming arching detours and corridors of motion, while the brush strokes were filled with the filigree of finer spaces that began thickly at the edge of the corridor, and then trailed outwards like sedimented dashes.

Also exhibited at this time (in Murchie's solo show, *Tokens*, also held at the Dalhousie Art gallery) were a series of painted, commercial cardboard boxes. The boxes were randomly selected and included two boxes of Red Rose tea (*see figure 4*) and two boxes

¹⁰⁹ John Murchie, *Bruce Campbell: Showing My Hand* (Sackville, New Brunswick: Struts Art Gallery, 1996)

of Premium Plus cat food. Once again following a straightforward programme of activity, Murchie began to apply layers of paint to the boxes, beginning at an edge, or rather the space where two edges meet, and methodically painting each side with even strokes running in the same direction. At each spatial edge ridges of paint began to form while the rest of the box was infected with a growth of lines: spaces left by the brush in the paint. Unlike Eric Cameron, whose *Thick Paintings* are also built up around detritus or mundane objects, Murchie allowed the packaging details to show through the paint, incorporating them into the work. While Murchie's work is constantly reduced by the unfair assumption that Cameron has set a precedent, their practices are in fact radically different. Cameron proceeds through obscurity and concealment (white wash or grey area), while Murchie proceeds through transparency and openness – colourful simplicity: "That may be a tale told by an idiot..."¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ John Murchie, "Artist Statement," *John Murchie: Tokens* (Halifax: Dalhousie Art Gallery, 1982).

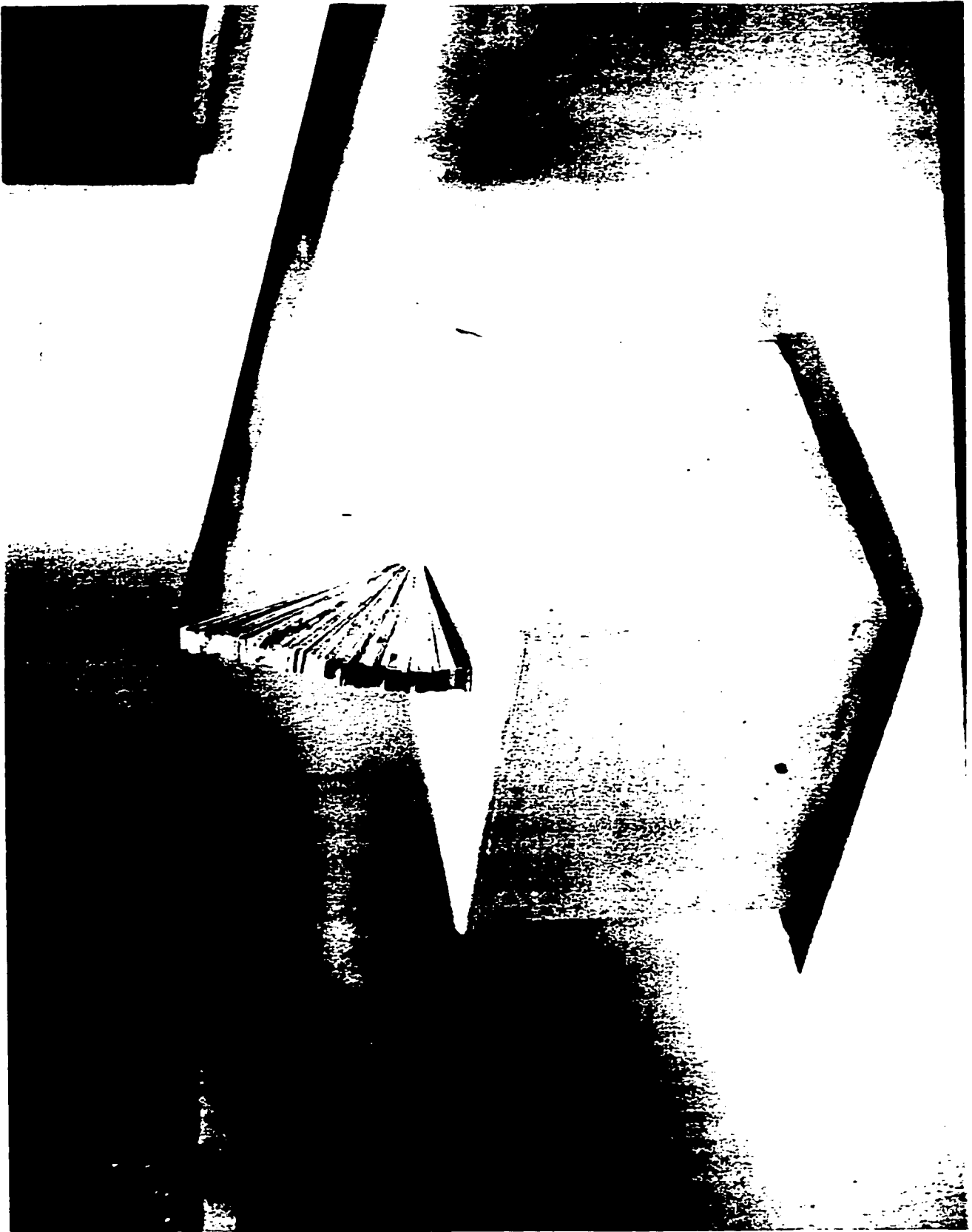


Figure 1

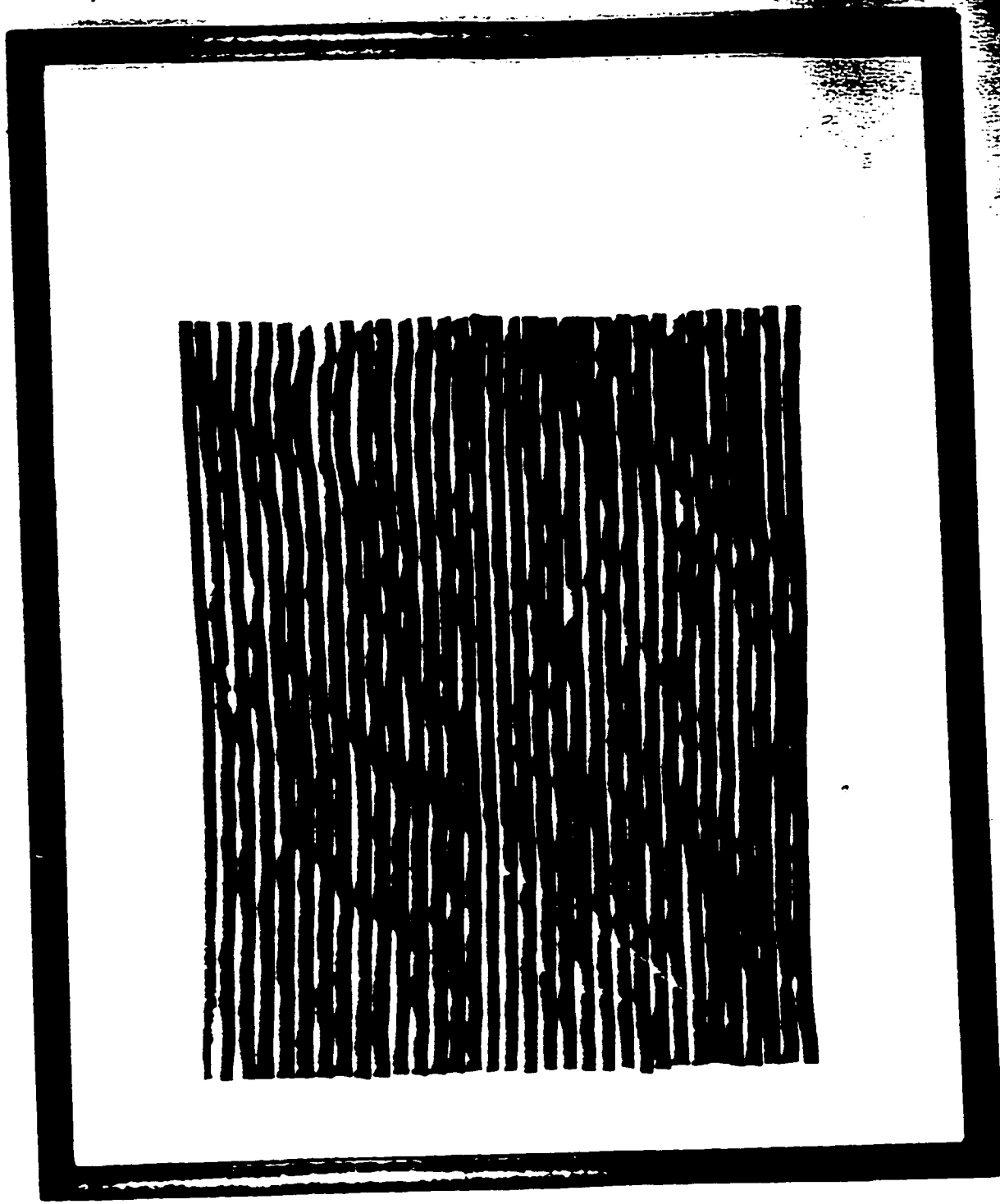
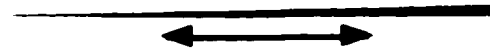


Figure 2



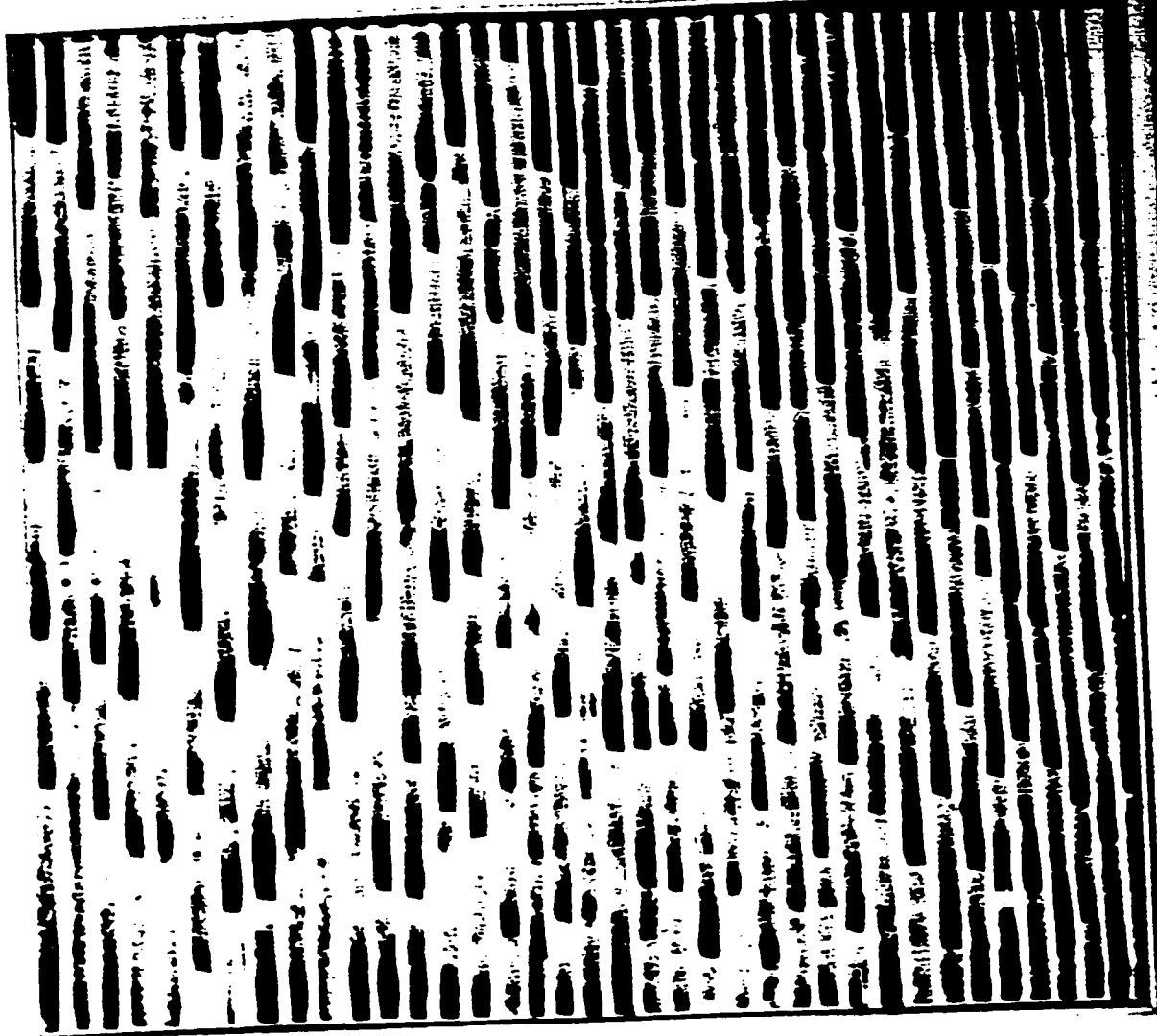


Figure 3



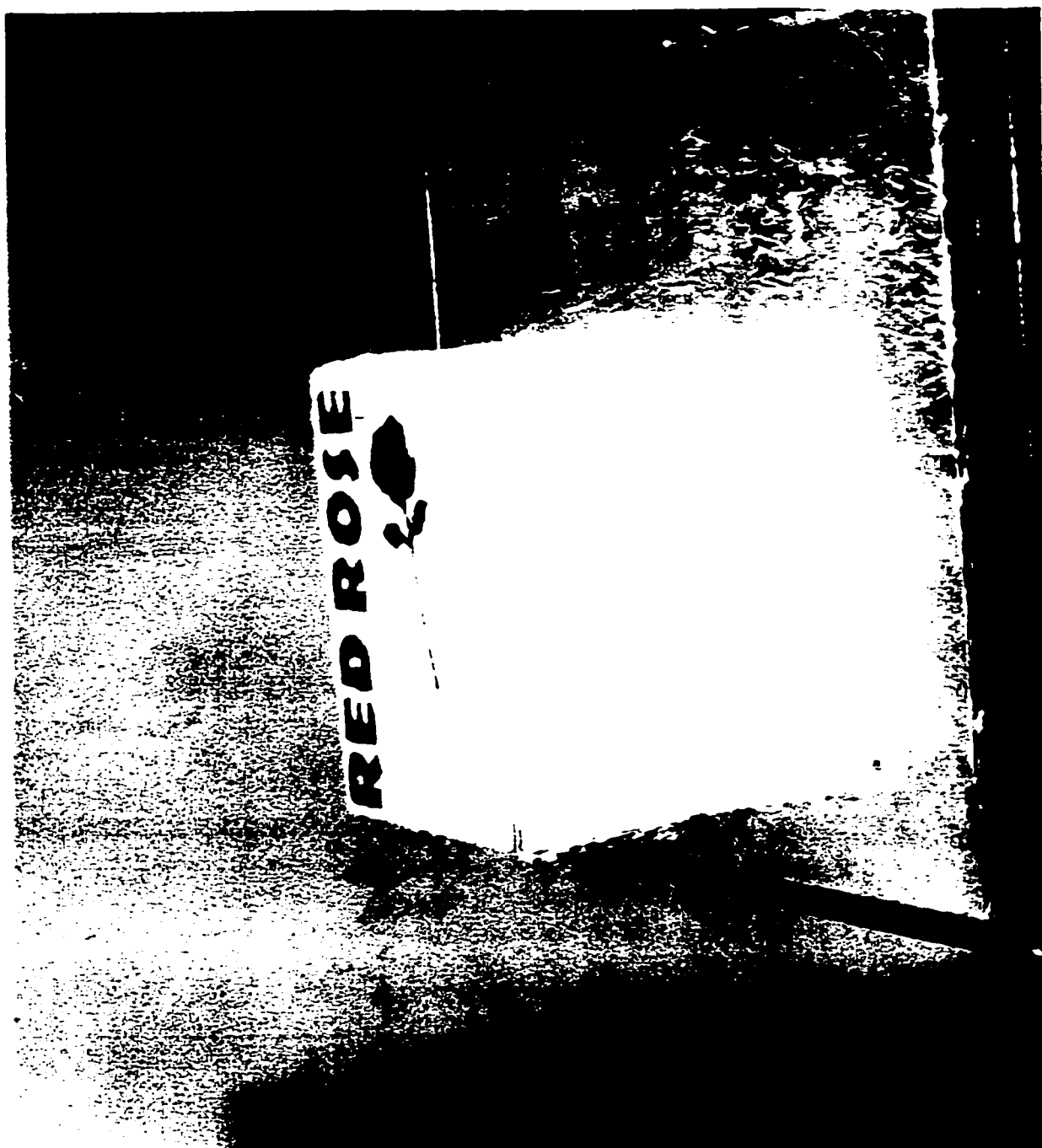


Figure 4

Chapter Two

Failure and the Feminine

How impossible the feminine is. Difficult and inaccessible, it is both more and less than its name, a sign that Man creates in order to confirm himself. Essentially supplemental, the feminine is, as such, inessential, a superfluity that remains after the man has been cut out - a rib, a recess in the clay hillside.

In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud wrote that “[w]omen represent the interests of the family and of sexual life. The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable.”¹¹¹ On the basis of this rather disturbing belief Freud is able to make an important, and for its time uncommon, observation: woman, as a result of the masculine character of civilisation, “finds herself forced into the background” by its claims. The entire scenario is predicated, however, on a somewhat interesting paradox. If the role of woman in civilization (family and sexual life) is one of passive representation in contradistinction to the active sublimations carried out by men, the end result is, according to Freud, that woman “adopts a hostile attitude towards” the very latency of her position. In her being made

¹¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 59.

passive she paradoxically becomes aggressive. This is what the Victorians referred to disdainfully as *passion* (it should be noted here that ‘passive’ and ‘passion’ share an etymological root). A woman who displayed this tendency was a woman on the edge of sense, and perhaps the verge of hysteria.

Freud’s thoughts regarding sexuality are also complicated by his insistence that female passivity is preceded in the pre-oedipal phase by a sexual aggressivity that he reduces, *in order to makes sense of it*, to a masculine continuum. At this stage the little girl is nothing other than a little man and the clitoris is a truncated penis.¹¹² The later discovery of the vagina coincides with the little girl-man’s becoming a woman in the passive sense that Freud gives this word. And yet, during this process in which the little girl-man is supposed to begin to give up her measure of sexual aggressivity, thus assuming a passive social role, her genitals also paradoxically become an aggressive monster. The suddenly realised lack of her body is at once a tremendous and violent threat to the ontology of men. Lacan will later transform this ontological-threat-by-way-of-the-corporeal into a matter of signification, a textual coup in which the threatened penis becomes the transcendental phallus that presides over the entire symbolic order. In Freud woman is both a failed man (the clitoris as an underdeveloped penis) and a threatening lack (the vagina as a horrific void and the conflation of the genital area with castration). In Lacan

¹¹² See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34 – 67.

she is a failure to signify. This is why, in order to effect a cure, the hysteric must be brought back into the world of masculine signification and made to speak.¹¹³

Not surprisingly, a similar confusion regarding the passionate nature of women arises in the writings of Bataille. Woman is the passive component in the dialectic of eroticism as well as in the economy of men (Bataille spends a great deal of time elaborating the kinship structures of Lévi-Strauss). At the same time, woman is also an erotic object, both desirable and horrific. Indeed, woman-as-erotic-object has, for Bataille, the aura of perdition. She puts men in the position of drones whose headlong and dizzy flight towards the light of the Queen ends in “a little death” (orgasm).¹¹⁴ Once again, the distinction between the passive and aggressive nature of woman is suspended in a paradox. While she may be the passive object of masculine erotic desires, this passivity is also cast in the light of an aggressive force of attraction that will pull men to their deaths. At the very least, logic and virtue both fail in the vortex of this blind flight towards the seductive void of discontinuity.

How impossible the feminine is, belonging at once to women in general and yet escaping them, leaving their agency at the threshold of something else, something far from here and yet very close. Impossible, yes, but not impossibility. The feminine does not shelter, like the mother of marginality and discontinuity, all the impossibles of this world. She is

¹¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 11 – 12.

¹¹⁴ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 221 - 251.

not Queen impossibility reigning with aporia on her side, despite the tendency of poststructural theorists to limn sexual aporia through the feminine (see, for example, the ‘becoming-woman’ of Deleuze and Guattari, the plural sexuality of women described by Irigaray, and Kristeva’s link between the feminine and the abject). If the ‘feminine’ is an aporetic concept, it marks a movement of deterritorialisation and deconstruction. That this heterogeneous movement should be reterritorialised by a single concept, allowing it to circumscribe sexual multiplicity as a whole, is unfortunate. It is predicated, perhaps, on a conflation of the feminine with the erotic.

The notion that the female body, as well as the feminine, “is a coming face to face with an unnamable otherness”¹¹⁵ that marks a limit and “threatens to destabilize the very foundations of sense and order,”¹¹⁶ can very easily, on the basis of the feminine being stereotyped as an erotic object or erotic force, come to represent eroticism as a whole. This is to do irreparable violence to the complexities of transgression as well as the agency and political voice of transexuality, homosexuality, sado-masochism, bisexuality, and a multiplicity of other sexualities.

It is one thing to take an aporia and make it emblematic, to turn the feminine into the becoming-erotic of all: the one and only borderline between a monistic dualism and a multiplicity. It is another, however, to open the feminine to “connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and

¹¹⁵ Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press), 59.

¹¹⁶ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), 25.

distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorialisations measured with the craft of a surveyor.”¹¹⁷ This is to understand the feminine not as some unnamable otherness welling up through cracks in the voice of language and civilization, but as the site of a crack-up, both violent and ludic, that gives way to experimentation – a relationship with the impossible. There are many crack-ups; the feminine is just one.

Mary Scott is An Artist Whose Project Fails

If the feminine is impossible, it fails in a variety of ways. This can also be said of the manner in which this failure is depicted within the limits of patriarchy, i.e.: lack, nonsense, vice or, inversely, the threat of masculine weakness (feminine seduction). In the 1980s a significant number of artistic practices began to attempt such a depiction, thereby addressing the problems inherent in presenting the feminine (imaginary, body, pleasure, *etc.*) within a phallogentric system of signification. Much of this work found a common impetus in the supposition that the aforesaid system had marginalised, indeed censored, the feminine to an extent that made any attempt to pin it down impossible, even in the extreme. As such, the feminine was both lack and hyperbole, superfluity and excess.

In 1982 Mary Scott, a Calgary-based artist with an M.A. from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, began to address this difficulty of ‘being’ for a woman. Her

¹¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 160.

preoccupation with polyphony or a multiplicity of voices that might resist “the logocentrism of masculine practice”¹¹⁸ found what at first seems to be a contradictory manifestation: words, images and mute corporeality. Influenced significantly by her encounter with French feminist theory and psychoanalysis, Scott began in 1984 to make paintings that “quoted-in-excess” from the work of “feminist theorists / critics, female literatures, and female visual artists.”¹¹⁹ These works comprised a web of excised sentences, fragmented images, gestures and words embedded in a thick surface of meticulously layered shellac, Rhoplex, spray paint, charcoal and other materials. Phrases appeared to ‘cry out’ from the irregular surfaces of these paintings like graffiti or tattoos, as violent in their demands as the tears, cuts and ruptures that scarred them (*see figure 5*). We write of the ‘crying out’ of words in order to account for something lost. To write that words, images, and corporeality ‘give voice’ is to make them voice silence in its absence, it is to infect speech - that traditional guarantor of presence - with an absence for which it cannot account, a part of itself that it cannot speak.

In 1986 Scott became increasingly interested in the psychic phenomenon of imagoes as a possible space for social change. Her process shifted at this time from one of layering and scratching away to one of threadbare decomposition. In this new work Scott proceeded laboriously, unraveling pieces of silk and other fabrics and combining them with pornographic and historical images, shredded materials, thread, gold leaf, and embroidery. Exhibited tellingly as works in progress, the *Imago* series was more

¹¹⁸ Mary Scott, “Excerpt From an Interview With Diana Nemiroff,” *Imago [XII], knots and figures, <<distance between>>* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1994), 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

ephemeral than her previous “quoting-in-excess” work, but no less tactile because of this (see figures 6, 7 and 8).

Scott’s interest in the feminine and feminist theory did not wane with this more explicitly psychoanalytic turn in her work. Indeed, the subtitles given to the *Imago* series continue to display a critical interest in the metanarrative of feminine absence: *Imago [V] <<who isn’t there>>*, 1987, *Imago [II] without her*, 1987. Scott is very careful to differentiate this work from actual illustrations of imagoes, choosing instead to refer to them liminally as “the first residues of/about/on my present project.”¹²⁰

According to Lacan, the imago is the term psychoanalysis gives to the psychic process whereby the glimpse that a subject catches of itself in a pane of glass is completed, or made whole within the psyche.¹²¹ “[F]or the imagoes – whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy – the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world, if we go by the mirror disposition that the *imago of one’s own body* presents in hallucinations or dreams...”¹²² As such, the affect of imagoes, whose silhouettes populate our imaginary, is similar to a calculation, on behalf of the symbolic order, of incalculable somatic space. The imago is not a thing, but this measuring phenomenon. Scott’s series

¹²⁰ Mary Scott, *Striving for Ideal Resolution / Tendre vers une solution idéale* (Calgary: Nickel Arts Museum, 1988), 32.

¹²¹ While the mirror stage is the precedent incident this process continues throughout the course of subjectivity.

¹²² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 3.

are not, as she states, illustrations of actual imagoes, nor are they demonstrations of their phenomenality. Instead, Scott takes the imago, whose liminal status might be related to the feminine, as an aporia in which the order of society is always already caught up. The point is not to reveal the imago, but to “bump up against” (wear away) the privileges of presentation.

There are a number of ways to respond to an artist involved in an experimental attempt to present something that escapes all presentation, something that, in actuality, precludes the very possibility of determination. Inevitably there will be those who denounce the project as an outright failure and the reviews of Scott’s work have their share of disappointed critics who want there to be an actual manifestation of absence – a speech instead of a ‘speaking about.’

In a 1989 review of Scott’s Mercer Union exhibition, for example, Melony Ward complains that “the long-repressed secret of the female sexual body is not spoken or brought into being in Scott’s work.”¹²³ Ward’s objections are not unfamiliar, belonging, as they do, to an ancient metaphysics of presence, the same discourse that gives us penis envy, phallo-logocentrism, and female passivity. This is precisely the discourse that Scott seeks to resist in her work: a discourse that insists something must be present – physically spoken – in order for it to be politically effective. Typically, Ward accuses Scott of “retrenching the ideology that she wishes to question” in that she has not made possible the impossible: a feminine body that speaks. The irony is, of course, that a speaking

¹²³ Melony Ward, “Mary Scott, Mercer Union,” *C Magazine* (summer: 1989), 75 - 76.

feminine body is one that speaks in the manner of men so that men will hear it. If Ward is disappointed with Scott's work it is because she is looking for presentations and not listening for slips and hesitations. "Scott's work seems to be interpreted before the viewer encounters it. Reading and viewing are closed down or one is forced to a distant speaking *about* the body, where the body becomes exchangeable coinage, where the explosive political power of the body becomes a topic of conversation, *to be forgotten when one turns one's eyes away.*"¹²⁴

Another form of detraction seeks to reject Scott's work on the basis of its superfluity. In this instance the address she gives the feminine body is, quite stereotypically, dismissed as the production of an excessive busybody. No doubt this has everything to do with a latent and not so latent disregard for what is frequently deemed 'women's work.'¹²⁵ William Wood finds Scott's work to be particularly trivial in this sense. "Her paintings," he writes, "have the look of hides, as she routinely slicks them up with gels, varnish and stiffening shellac, and she gums up these images as well, forcing spraypainted and vinyl-coated text onto this ungainly, unstretched surface."¹²⁶ Wood provides us with a good example of the paradoxical position of the feminine which is at once lacking (routine) and hyperbolic (ungainly). Once again, Scott's work is disparaged on the basis of its failure to fully manifest or be present. For Wood, her paintings are perversions, "high-

¹²⁴ Emphasis added, Ibid.

¹²⁵ It is interesting to note that much of Scott's interest in the corporeality of her materials, and her rather obsessive relationship to that corporeality, can be seen to arise narrowly from her time at NSCAD. While artists such as Eric Cameron, Garry Neill Kennedy, and Gerry Ferguson might have their work characterized in terms of Masochism it is never 'woman's work' despite its affinity (particularly Ferguson's stencil paintings) with the criteria of that particular stereotype.

¹²⁶ William Wood, "Skin Jobs," *C Magazine* (Fall: 1986), 83.

mindful graffiti” that “never amount to much of interest ... [H]er imagery is indistinct; neither bad enough to be expressionistic nor good enough to seem optically ‘there.’”¹²⁷ Interestingly enough, Wood’s article is titled “Skin Jobs,” a particularly denigrating phrase connoting prostitution and fellatio. As always, when a woman appears to be on the verge of ingression she becomes a whore.

The other side to these arguments is a defence in which Scott herself participates to a certain degree. This contingent adheres to the notion that Scott’s work presents the feminine as an enigma that comes from somewhere outside the dominant phallogentric discourse and which, on the basis of its “disruptive excess,” jams or suspends the mechanisms of that discourse. This claim, active in the writings of feminists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, posits a feminist practice both playful and hermeneutic. It is a practice in which the feminine “wells up and seeps through the cracks and spaces between the familiar meanings of words and images, circulating irrepressibly in the no-place of non-sense.”¹²⁸ The feminine is, in this view, radical alterity.

The common notion that Scott is involved in a project of “reclaiming ... the female body by making audible her speech”¹²⁹ is one founded upon this conception of feminine alterity. As such, her works function as partial objects – fragmented *énonces* from

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Jessica Bradley & Diana Nemiroff, *Songs of Experience* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1986), 44.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

another world that connote “the presence of the unrepresentable subject.”¹³⁰ They disrupt in the same way that a “strident cry” might startle us from complacency. They are, in this way, inherently aggressive institutions of presence, a presence made all the more disruptive because of its partiality and hence its possibility. Indeed, in this view Scott’s work is the becoming-possible of the feminine.

While this type of feminist reading may seem, at first glance, extremely positive and perhaps empowering, it tends to neglect an important and paradoxical dynamic. While Scott is emphatic about the aims of her project towards “possible intervention (cultural signs) and access to change (cultural processes),”¹³¹ she is also equally apt to relate it to more subtle forms of agency, such as gestures, “bumping up against,” “going-towards” and whispering.¹³² It is very rarely that Scott invokes the discursive figures of rupture, disruption or jamming. In fact, her *oeuvre* denotes a process more indicative of wearing-away (persistence) than breaking-up (disruption). “I am becoming really interested in having the painting almost not there.”¹³³

These considerations become more cogent in light of the frequency with which this disruption narrative is accompanied by a more stereotypical seduction narrative. If Mary Scott is the disruptive agent, why is her work so insistently considered seductive? The

¹³⁰ Earl Miller, “First Biennial of Contemporary Canadian Art, National Gallery, Ottawa,” *C Magazine* (Winter: 1990), 58.

¹³¹ Mary Scott, “Artist Statement,” *Striving for Ideal Resolution*, 32.

¹³² See Jeanne Randolph, “Quotations, Imagos, Back Again: An Interview With Mary Scott”, *C Magazine* (Winter: 1990), 35; Mary Scott, *Imago [XII], knots and figures, <<distance between>>*, 5.

¹³³ Mary Scott, quoted by Sheila Butler, “Mary Scott, Gallery 111,” *Vanguard* (December / January: 1988), 31 -32

writing that surrounds her work continually sets up a paradigm in which the work addresses “social issues, including access to power, feminism and sexuality” while also being “more seductive than rhetorical in nature.”¹³⁴ Sandra Tivy’s review of Scott’s 1986 show at the Peter Whyte Gallery states that “these works radiate a subtle eroticism” in which “the viewer becomes engaged by the sensuality of the treatment, the power of the image, or the seductiveness of the quoted phrases.”¹³⁵ Similarly, a 1990 review of the work Scott exhibited in the *First Biennial of Contemporary Canadian Art* describes the “lavishness of the material ... as impenetrable as it is seductive.”¹³⁶ What exactly Scott’s work is both tempting and forbidding the viewer to do remains, of course, unanswered by these reviews. To view Mary Scott’s work as seductive is, as such, to view it as a void into which we are tempted to pass, an opening that will lead us to the dizzy alterity of the feminine. In other words, to penetrate a woman is to ‘know’ her.

Scott’s proposition is, however, something quite different from these rather coarse assertions. The distinction that needs to be made is one between a project of discovery that reveals through presentation (re-claiming, making audible, *etc.*) and an experimental project of ruination (remaining). This is to address her work as an experience (product) and enactment (process) of ruin in a sublime sense, rather than as a “rich and fascinating area of discovery.”¹³⁷ To borrow from Robert Smithson, Scott’s work ‘rises into ruins.’

¹³⁴ Vincent Varga, *Aspects of Contemporary Painting in Alberta* (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1987), 52.

¹³⁵ Sandra Tivy, “Mary Scott, Peter Whyte Gallery,” *Vanguard* (February / March: 1986), 64.

¹³⁶ Earl Miller, “First Biennial of Contemporary Canadian Art, National Gallery, Ottawa,” *C Magazine* (Winter: 1990), 58.

¹³⁷ Sandra Tivy, “Mary Scott, Peter Whyte Gallery,” *Vanguard* (February / March: 1986), 64.

Such a ruin is not the same as a product of destruction or disruption; it implies and emphasises a remainder that is more connotative of deconstruction than it is of the cuts of negative criticism. Scott's work is the work of an affirmative negativity, it is a group of remains (traces), it remains (rests), and it implies a remainder that is both more and less than its being-there. The triumph of the feminine in the masculine symbolic as an ambiguous "welling up" of alterity becomes, instead, the ruination of that symbolic from within its own understanding of what is possible. The impossible remains.

Body Haunts

The majority of critics, curators and writers are convinced that, in her work, Mary Scott presents us with a body, sometimes feminine other times modern - a body that speaks. According to Nell Tenhaaf "body identification has persisted in the readings of Scott's works" despite the artist never having claimed "to represent her own self or any other body in her paintings."¹³⁸ Indeed, in her published artist statements and interviews Scott does not often mention the body, feminine or otherwise. And yet, the vast majority of those who have devoted words to her work remain convinced that this is her definitive subject.

¹³⁸ Nell Tenhaaf, "Mary Scott: in me more than me," *Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles*, eds. Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Scheuing (Toronto: YYY Books, 1998), 46.

In his essay written for the 1989 exhibition of Scott's *Imago* and *Back Again* series at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Bruce Grenville situates himself emphatically in this persistent group. He writes:

In her recent work Mary Scott seems to propose the possibility of a different body. This is neither the humanist body of the Renaissance, the rationalized body of the Classical age, nor the ironic body of 'postmodernism', rather, it is the body of our late modern age. This body is a site of darkness and sorrow. It is a body of embarrassment and failure, of sentiment and mortality. A body of fluids and of spaces. It is a recent body, a body of lived experiences, a body of moments which cannot be represented or figured symbolically.¹³⁹

The most dominant interpretation of Scott's work involves a "making audible" of the female body's speech. Jessica Bradely and Diana Nemiroff write that Scott's "layering of words and images ... suggests the imbrication of voice and body;" an interweaving in which "they cannot be read separately."¹⁴⁰ This statement is quickly followed up by the explanation that "the reclaiming of the female body by making audible her speech is a central part of Scott's project."¹⁴¹ Similarly, Melony Ward writes that "Scott is trying to give voice to an erotic female body that has been posited as 'other' in patriarchal language – a repulsive body."¹⁴² According to Ward, however, "[t]he commendable attempt to speak the silenced and marginalized female body seems to elicit a relapse into a frenetic speaking *about* the body, where the body is communicated, exchanged and

¹³⁹ Bruce Grenville, *Mary Scott* (Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1989), 7.

¹⁴⁰ Jessica Bradley & Diana Nemiroff, *Songs of Experience*, 43 -44

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Melony Ward, "Mary Scott, Mercer Union, Toronto," 75 – 76.

forgotten. Rather than speaking the body as a disruptive political force, the work requires a discourse *around* it to address the problems of speaking the body.”¹⁴³

*I am not looking for one reading or one meaning.*¹⁴⁴

Although Scott frequently discusses her work in terms of a multiplicity or “coming together of voices,” she almost never mentions speech. “I began to allow a lot of voices to occur in the work. They would be ruptured voices, voices that might be conflicting. It was a hope of mine to arrange over a surface not only a conflicting array of images and voices, but within that, the tenor of each voice.”¹⁴⁵ To give voice to something is not the same as speaking it, the former being a matter of *tone* and the latter of *meaning*. Voices inflect speech, and in this supplemental function, reminiscent of the feminine, they infect it. One voices a speech, but to speak a voice is impossible. The voice, that which frames speech, paradoxically cannot be spoken by it. Making an assemblage of voices – ruptured, conflicting and particular – is an experimental project in which it is not the *content* but the *tone* that takes precedence. It is experimental (deconstructive) in that voices are where speech fails and also, paradoxically, the very ground upon which speech founds itself.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Scott, “Excerpt From an Interview With Diana Nemiroff, 12 September 1985,” *Mary Scott: Imago [XII], knots and figures, <<distance between>>*.

¹⁴⁵ Mary Scott, “Quotations, Imagos, Back Again: An Interview With Mary Scott”, *C Magazine* (Winter: 1990), 34.

“Femininity speaking. The voices rise and fall, whisper and shout. At times rendered inaudible by the amorphous layers of paint and shellac that trace over and obscure them; at times rendered invisible by the twists and tears of torn canvas that hide them ... The female body which is spoken and celebrated in and of and through the shifting text of each painting.”¹⁴⁶ If voices haunt speech with the impossible, a body that is voiced cannot be spoken. The female body is, as such, not spoken in Mary Scott’s work; no-body is. If Scott’s work relates to the body, it is a body voiced as the tenor of voices. The body is not present in these works, but haunts it as “an experience in the most unstable ... sense of the term; it is an experience of frames, of dehiscence, of dislocations.”¹⁴⁷ In Scott’s work the body is riven with non-presence, cracked up and worn away by it. As such, the unraveling and open surfaces of the *Imago* series, as well as the shredded figures of *Back Again*, are not failed or successful attempts to present the female body or any body at all, but rather the gaps of a tonal differential - a ghost story.

Experimental Raveling

As for the labour involved, I was never very interested in just constructing images. What mattered to me was what I understood and why I was going to use my energy in that way. So the process of making an image for six months and making a piece line by little line

¹⁴⁶ Sigrid Dable, *Mary Scott: Textu(r)al Strategies* (Winnipeg: Gallery 1.1.1. University of Manitoba, 1987), 4.

¹⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Spatial Arts: An Interview With Jacques Derrida,” *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Petter Brunette & David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 15.

*made a lot of sense, because by the time I had finished I knew why I had done it, and why I would never do it again.*¹⁴⁸

Derrida writes that the danger to experimental procedures such as deconstruction is not the impossible, but rather the possible, “the danger of becoming an available set of rule governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches.”¹⁴⁹ Experimentation, as such, is thus based in a meticulous and repetitive effort (as the detail of Derridian texts will attest) that does not become a programme. It is a rhythm without a song. We are recalled by this paradox to Lyotard who, in writing of postmodern art’s experimentalism, states that “rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*,”¹⁵⁰ and also, to echo Mary Scott, why it will never be done again.

As has already been mentioned, the notion that Scott’s creative practice is one that attempts to aggressively disrupt a patriarchal system of signification, organization of the body, and order of subjectivity is at variance with the artist’s own rhetoric. Similarly, the description of her work in terms of presentation, revelation and discovery goes against the grain of a project that she continually evaluates in terms of an open-ended attempt and investigation. This is apparent in her relationship to the “quoting-in-excess” work

¹⁴⁸ Mary Scott, “Excerpt From an Interview With Diana Nemiroff, 12 September 1985,” *Mary Scott: Imago [XII], knots and figures, <<distance between>>*, 3 – 4.

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Force of the Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld & David Gray Carlson (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 30.

¹⁵⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

that she characterises as an attempt to “bump up against notions of representation [and] examine issues of sexuality for the female.”¹⁵¹ Her intent in this work was “to make a gesture” in the direction of that sexuality and not “to contain it, or control it, or claim it.”¹⁵²

This oblique method continued throughout the *Imago* series, a project in which her interest was “not to claim [the imago], or to frame it, but to find out.”¹⁵³ Scott does not admit what she hopes to find out specifically. We can assume that she means to find imagoes, but this is never stated explicitly. Indeed, she often says the opposite of this, insisting that these paintings “are not illustrations of this psychoanalytic site, nor are they complete, coherent examinations.”¹⁵⁴ There is no ‘body’ to this search; it merely follows, “line by little line,” a movement, a receding horizon, an oblique silhouette, a hesitation in the fabric of sexuality. Through a meticulous project of unraveling and fraying, Scott searches for the rhythms of the indeterminate (imagoes, eroticism, the feminine, ruins) in the gestures of experimentation – a goal-less work, a “finding out” that finds nothing and so is always already failure. In the middle of this failure (speaking as a failure to speak and presentation as a failure to present) Scott’s work is, quite literally, in ruins. A ruin is not necessarily a negative thing. “First of all, it is clearly not a thing.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Mary Scott, “Quotations, Imagos, Back Again: An Interview With Mary Scott”, *C Magazine* (Winter: 1990), 35.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁵⁴ Mary Scott, *Striving for Ideal Resolution / Tendre vers une solution idéale*, 32.

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, 44.

To present the feminine as a ruin is to bear witness to the impossibility of doing it justice and perhaps of justice itself. The feminine does not well up through the cracks of linear time. It is instead the site of a crack-up – its own. A multiplicity circulates amongst the tears in this fabric. Tears in which Scott invites us to love the feminine as a ruin, both necessary and impossible, and let sexuality become a multiplicity of threads tangled randomly in the wake of an experimental unraveling and wearing away of and in its name.

with a
 mouth
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 which
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 available and yet unobtainable
 of enjoyment in the
 of a person

Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Chapter Three

An Enchanted Recording Surface

Desire and Dread was the title of Eric Cameron's retrospective exhibition held at the Muttart Gallery in 1998. The significance of desire is rather obvious when the tenor of Cameron's own philosophy – its acceptance and admission of even the most trivial or horrific sexual impulses – is taken into consideration. Desire is thus, quite naturally, the most predominant theme in the discourse that flourishes around his well-known *Thick Paintings*, sculptural forms that Cameron began making during his time at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Inspired by the layer painting of his colleagues (e.g.: Garry Neill Kennedy, John Murchie, Gerry Fergusson, Bruce Campbell and others), Cameron began applying thousands of layers of gesso to every day objects.¹⁵⁶ As the gesso accreted “a new kind of object” began to form, one that steadily superceded “the identity of the core subject with one definable only in terms of the process of its own genesis.”¹⁵⁷ This activity, and the objects that it continues to produce, are understood by most to be as much a matter of obsession as they are sublimation.

¹⁵⁶ Some of the objects that Cameron has painted include, for example, a rose (*Alice's Rose*), two eggs (*Egg* and *Edwin's Egg*), a couple of lobsters (*Crouching Lobster* and *Extended Lobster*), a chair, a beer bottle, a brush stroke and a book of matches.

¹⁵⁷ Eric Cameron, *Bent Axis Approach* (Calgary: The Nickle Arts Museum, 1984), 26.

Not so easily accounted for, however, is the second term in Cameron's retrospective exhibition title – dread – the negative connotations of which find strange residence amongst the concepts of beauty and spirituality that are, with equal consistency, accorded the *Thick Paintings* (see figures 11 and 12). One would be hard put to find an essay, beyond Cameron's own work of course, that describes the *Thick Paintings* as dreadful, unless one includes the commentary of those who feel that "pushing a pea up a mountain with one's nose would surely be more satisfying"¹⁵⁸ than meticulously applying thousands of layers of gesso to household objects, transforming them into bizarre-looking sculptures. The concept of dread must therefore be understood as an unexplored latency in Cameron's work. Indeed, the only writing that comes close to addressing this latency is Leslie Dawn's characterisation of the paintings as "gigantic turds" in a scatologically funny sort of way.¹⁵⁹

The phrase "desire and dread" was culled from an essay that Cameron wrote in 1991 in honor of his donating a large portion of the video work that he produced in the '70s to Art Metropole. The opening sentence of the essay, published by Art Metropole in a discrete compilation titled *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, reads: "As I look back on what my life has been since puberty, it seems to divide up into a rather complex pattern of periods of desire and periods of dread, the dread occasioned, as often as not, by the folly to which desire has led me."¹⁶⁰ The significance of this sentence is undeniable. If the *Thick*

¹⁵⁸ A. R. Daniel, "A Bucket of White Paint Please," *Globe & Mail* (Saturday, February 3, 1990), D7.

¹⁵⁹ Leslie Dawn, "Pleasures of Paradox – Works of Eric Cameron," *Desire and Dread: Eric Cameron* (Calgary: Muttart Public Art Gallery, 1998), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Eric Cameron, *Sex Lies and Lawn Grass* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 1.

Paintings are, as Diana Nemiroff writes, the “image of our desires,”¹⁶¹ they are also part of a complex pattern that includes a dread occasioned by that desire.

That this element of dread, with its erotic nuances, has not been thoroughly explored in Cameron’s work is due, perhaps, to his less visible practice as a video artist. This is most reasonably a result of the infrequency with which his videos are exhibited, some having never been exhibited at all.¹⁶² Although Cameron often incorporates video into the larger installations of his *Thick Paintings*, the videos that he produced between 1972 and 1976 while teaching at the University of Guelph are rarely on public display, although they are easily viewed at their current residence in the National Gallery of Canada. For Cameron, this work constitutes “a period of release” within the patterns of his artistic production, as well as within the repression he retrospectively accords to his *Process Paintings* (1960s). In his own words, the videos form “the only time of unequivocal release I can discern in my art, and even that was only a release within my art and into my art.”¹⁶³

When Cameron came by accident to begin making videos he had, up until that point, been engrossed in a very programmatic form of process art. The paintings of this antecedent period involved covering the surface of canvases with “absolutely regular grids” of masking tape and then methodically applying paint over the configuration they created with a cloth (*see figure 9*).¹⁶⁴ To his initial dismay, Cameron discovered during

¹⁶¹ Diana Nemiroff, “Rethinking the Object,” *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*, eds. Robert Brighurst et al. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1983), 205.

¹⁶² *Numb Bares III* has never been made public.

¹⁶³ Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ Eric Cameron, *In Retrospect ...* (Calgary: Stride Gallery, 1988).

the course of this system that “it was impossible to ever lay the tape out absolutely straight.”¹⁶⁵ He even went so far, in his desire for absolute regularity, as to rule lines on to the canvas with a pencil. It was only when this attempt failed that he began to accept the intrusion that random forces inevitably make, even in the most exacting programmes. Having admitted to this uncontrollable intrusion of chance, Cameron eventually came to understand the purpose of his art, and art in general, as its very justification – the justification of the inevitability of art’s particular forms.¹⁶⁶ This principle, culled from the essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch” by Clement Greenberg, was a perversion of the teleological structures of Greenbergian modernism into their opposite: the inhuman inevitability of chance.

When presented in 1972 with the opportunity of becoming a video artist, Cameron set out with the same logic of production that had produced his *Process Paintings*. “I attempted to devise a similar way of working that would allow me to manipulate the equipment of the video medium in ways that would generate sounds and images I had neither perceived nor anticipated in advance of viewing the resulting tape.”¹⁶⁷ These processes included, among others, strapping a camera to one’s ankle and walking around with it, as well as putting the lens in contact with various surfaces [a body (*Moving the Camera in Contact With a Woman’s Body*, 1973/75), a wall (*Matilda’s Room*, 1973), a window pane (*Contact Piece: Moving the Camera Against the Inside of a Window Pane*, 1973), etc.) and dragging it methodically over that surface for the duration of the videotape.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Eric Cameron, “To Justify the Inevitability of its Particular Forms,” *Bent Axis Approach*, 1 – 41.

¹⁶⁷ Eric Cameron, *Sex Lies and Lawn Grass*, 1.

In retrospect, Cameron observes that the “notion of having a vision and then externalising the vision on the canvas is about as far away from the way my art has worked as anything could be.”¹⁶⁸ While such an observation is straightforward enough in the case of the *Process Paintings* – the grid-like patterns of which become images only in the most geometric and incidental way – the medium of video conversely makes images unavoidable. “The video camera once switched on always captures an aspect of the world of appearances, regardless of our intentions.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, in using the new medium of video, Cameron felt beset by a question that had been precluded by the *Process Paintings*: what was there “in the world that I cared about sufficiently deeply to allow it to become the subject-matter of my art[?]”¹⁷⁰ In the end the only answer he could think of, even if it was “uttered only silently,” was sex.¹⁷¹ “I also knew that what I meant was not some rationalized, pasteurized concept of romantic love or procreative power in the universe, but the actuality of my own impulses towards women, in all their prurient incongruity – and without denying the element of violence (albeit mild by some comparisons) that is an inextricable need within the fulfilment of my own desire.”¹⁷² And so, Eric Cameron’s videos “increasingly came to deal with sexuality ... with a sexuality that [was] tinged ... with an element of sadomasochism.”¹⁷³ Sadomasochism is, according to Deleuze, a misbegotten entity, a “semiological howler,” the syndrome of which conceals a bevy of

¹⁶⁸ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

¹⁶⁹ Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, 6.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷³ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

disparate symptoms including two separate transcendental functions, the “twin ways in which the monstrous exhibits itself in reflection.”¹⁷⁴ Sade and Masoch together are, as such, quite dreadful.

By his own admission, the most horrific video that Cameron made during this period of ‘unequivocal release’ was *Numb Bares III*, c 1974 - 76. It is, according to him, the most sensitive as well as the best of all his videos, and it is one he most wants preserved.¹⁷⁵ In this video a woman (Marlene Hoff, who participated voluntarily) stands in front of a table, takes down her pants, bends over and waits for Cameron to spank her. Cameron duly delivers the blows which are then given over to a sequence of images: her face as she waits to be hit, her buttocks as they are slapped, her prone body as it is forced violently in contact with the table against which she is braced, *etc.* Cameron proceeds methodically to slap her until she yells, after a relatively short period of time, “Stop! STOP!” at which point he ceases and very casually commends her for her service. Various repetitions of this sequence are interspersed with stills of his hand colliding with her skin, as well as images of a garden. At certain points these images are accompanied by the voice of Hoff as she narrates, describing in the second person the sensation of being hit. She explains a rush of emptiness that moves upwards, from stomach to throat, “choking you with fear.”¹⁷⁶ She states that it rushes up through your whole body as you wait to be hit, describing the increased tension that occurs as one waits for the hit to be

¹⁷⁴ Gilles Deleuze & Sacher von Masoch, *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 134, 23.

¹⁷⁵ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey. Calgary, February 25, 2000.

¹⁷⁶ Eric Cameron, *Numb Bares III*, c. 1974 – 1976, b/w video, National Gallery of Canada.

dealt. She describes the pain, where it is located on her body, and the jumbled confusion she feels.

Throughout *Numb Bares III* there is an overt repetition of images and sequences that lend a sense of infinity, or at the very least a sense of magnification, to what must have been originally a rather perfunctory act. The violence of the spanking is, in comparison to what might be found in the pages of a Sadeian novel for instance, “fortunately mild.”¹⁷⁷ This having been said, the medium of video and the acceleration it provides this ‘mild’ demonstration cannot help but echo, however distantly, the mania of Sade’s writing. This echo is enough to make clear “how close to an edge you are that is absolutely terrifying.”¹⁷⁸ For Cameron, this edge – a threshold between the trivial and the monstrous – exists because the things shown in *Numb Bares III* are “mild and harmless.”¹⁷⁹ “As long as the woman is in agreement then it’s fine. But you can see it is going in a direction where the results could be absolutely horrifying. And so it does give you pause.”¹⁸⁰

For Blanchot the major obscenity in the writing of Sade was not the gruesome episodes he depicted; these were only the minor aspects of a violence that found limited pleasure in negation. Instead, for Blanchot, what was truly scandalous about Sade was his attempt to say everything, including that which is unspeakable: absolute violence, an infinite crime. On a minor, or as Deleuze calls it, “personal,” level, this attempt to say what isn’t

¹⁷⁷ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, Calgary, February 25, 2000.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

said is equivalent to creating disorder,¹⁸¹ “the imprint of a first hand experience of things that we don’t acknowledge first hand.”¹⁸² On the other, major or “impersonal,” level, what isn’t said “is that which absolutely cannot be said, that which exceeds language, that which renders the philosophical obligation or compulsion to say everything futile, [an] eternal attempt to appropriate the inappropriable.”¹⁸³ Or, as Deleuze puts it, “pornological literature is aimed above all at confronting language with its own limits, with what is in a sense a ‘nonlanguage’ (violence that does not speak, eroticism that remains unspoken).”¹⁸⁴

In the minor, personal instance Cameron’s videos are somewhat horrific, too horrific in the case of *Numb Bares III* to be shown in a public gallery, although it has always been on the edge of being public. In the major, impersonal instance, however, they are trivial, “and in admitting that your whole life was cast in darkness by the denial of those things admits how trivial at core you really are. And that is the difficult thing. It’s not that if people knew about these things that they would be outraged and horrified: they would snigger. It’s infantile.”¹⁸⁵ In Cameron’s videos the attempt to say everything, to admit everything about the unspeakable nature of one’s erotic compulsions, is reduced to a ‘futile attempt to appropriate the inappropriable.’ This accounts for the double bind of release and repression that Cameron describes in *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*. “The

¹⁸¹ Gilles Deleuze & Sacher von Masoch, *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 15 – 25; Jane Gallop, *Intersections: A Reading of Sade with Bataille, Blanchot and Klossowski* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 52.

¹⁸² Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

¹⁸³ Jane Gallop, *Intersections*, 52.

¹⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” *Masochism*, 22.

¹⁸⁵ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

reimposition of repression had begun at a time when the period of release had hardly started. But, if that means that the period of release was never absolute, it also means that, thereafter, the repression was never absolute either. Real repression entails the repression not only of that which is found to be inadmissible, but also the fact of repression itself. The blanks reveal more than they negate.”¹⁸⁶

The understanding that the ‘blanks reveal more than they negate’ corresponds with a statement that can be seen to align Cameron’s video practice with a sadeian attempt to say everything. First appearing in Cameron’s 1972 text, *Notes for Video Art*, the statement, “it is not possible to pose a question like ‘What can you do with a television camera’ without in the same instant suppressing the pre-echoes of an obscene reply:

‘ ,’” cannot help but resonate with the double bind of Sade’s project – the simultaneity of major / minor, release / repression, exposed / concealed, and posed / suppressed. The obscenity of this reply is its partiality, a triviality that aspires to speak everything, to admit the entirety of abjection.

We may begin to understand the importance of Cameron’s video practice in its own right, as well as in its relation to the *Thick Paintings*, by considering an exhibition that occurred in Arles, at the École Nationale de la Photographie, titled *Exposer/ Cacher (Exposed / Concealed)*(1992). In this exhibition Cameron presented both a *Thick Painting* and a *Thin*

¹⁸⁶ Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, 3.

*Painting*¹⁸⁷ each formed around two (one colour, one black and white) rolls of exposed film (see figure 10). Preserved on these exposed rolls of film were images that Cameron had taken in private with the help of a female model who had allowed “every orifice in her body” to be photographed.¹⁸⁸ Such a project resonates with the memory of similar programmes carried out in videos such as *Moving the Camera in Contact With a Woman's Body*, 1973/75 (in which Cameron put the lens in contact with a model's naked body and then dragged it over her skin for the duration of the videotape), *Insertion: My Mouth*, 1973/75 and *Ha Ha*, 1974/76 (in which the camera lens is continuously engulfed in the mouths, formerly of Cameron only, and latterly of Cameron and Marlene Hoff).

The exposure and concealment of the rolls of film took place in the visiting artist's apartment, provided by the École, in the time leading up to the exhibition. Typically, Cameron was very open about the activities that would be taking place in his apartment, but also insistent that they be done in private. “The fact that I am in the (artist's apartment) working on the project, photographing the woman and then applying gesso to the rolls of film, will be known to everyone in the school who is interested. I will make no attempt to keep my activity a secret; but the work itself will be done in private ... what is exposed in the imagination of those who care to speculate may well be more than is concealed behind closed doors.”¹⁸⁹ Throughout the generation of the *Thick Painting* and *Thin Painting* Cameron kept his usual checklist of the coats of paint he applied. The

¹⁸⁷ *Thin Paintings* are produced according to the same logic as a *Thick Painting* with the exception of their premature termination. *Thick Paintings* continue to be worked on indefinitely.

¹⁸⁸ Every orifice included, for Cameron: right eye, left eye, right ear-hole, left ear-hole, right nostril, left nostril, mouth, nipple of right breast, nipple of left breast, navel, vagina (and urethra) and anus.

¹⁸⁹ Eric Cameron, *Exposed / Concealed* (Arles: École Nationale de la Photographie, 1992), 8.

addition of a video camera to record each painting's progress in a time-lapse devised by the artist was, however, a bit of a departure from his usual methods. Along with the initial and brief intrusion of the woman who was photographed, this video camera was the only exception to the privacy of Cameron's ritual, a witness that recorded "only a small fraction of [his] painting activity."¹⁹⁰ The activities taking place in the seclusion of Cameron's studio space were almost entirely out of the picture, that is, obscene:

“ .”

This obscenity has an almost indisputable relationship to the widespread preoccupation with what lies, beyond more paint and the 'core-object,' at the heart of the *Thick Paintings*. Of all the theories available, the keenest and most prominent belong to Diana Nemiroff and Leslie Dawn. Believing that the *Thick Paintings* "give us the image not of ourselves but of our desires," Nemiroff conceives of this work as an elaborate sublimation, the core of which may be any number of repressions (primary, oedipal, etc.).¹⁹¹ Dawn, on the other hand, believes that the *Thick Paintings* are not only cryptic, but also crypt-like. "There is no solid centre," he writes; "these are signifiers that have become unstable, changing, without a core of meaning or a metaphysical transcendent certainty."¹⁹² In this scenario the centre of a *Thick Painting* is not a location but a function, a radical contingency that undermines signifying structures and semiotic codes.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Diana Nemiroff, "Rethinking the Object," *Visions: Contemporary Art in Canada*, 205.

¹⁹² Leslie Dawn, "Pleasures of Paradox – Works of Eric Cameron," *Desire and Dread* (Calgary: The Muttart Public Art Gallery, 1998), 12.

Despite the interpretations made by both Nemiroff and Dawn, Cameron's answer to the question of a 'core beyond' is adamant: *if* there is something at the core of the *Thick Paintings* it is *Numb Bares III*.¹⁹³ "Nobody who has not seen *Numb Bares III* can really understand my art."¹⁹⁴ One of the criticisms that Cameron makes of his video *oeuvre* is that it "merely exposes and perhaps inflames rather than reconciles desire."¹⁹⁵ *If* we are to postulate a core beyond the *Thick Paintings* it must be this inflamed desire, not as a loss, but as the "blackness [potency] of unfulfilled yearning."¹⁹⁶ This is a desire that leads to dread – a yearning that is haunted, not with a lost object, but a sense of folly.

Slippery Desire

*The Body without Organs: "It awaits you; it is an inevitable exercise or experimentation, already accomplished the moment you undertake it, unaccomplished as long as you don't."*¹⁹⁷

'*If* we are to postulate a core;' perhaps we should not. Art analysis, following the movements of art and society dialectically, has a tendency to reduce product to process and vice versa. This disturbs Eric Cameron:

¹⁹³ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, 8.

¹⁹⁶ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

¹⁹⁷ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 149.

I have always been aware that works such as mine, whose production extends over a long period of time [,] might be in danger of being submerged beneath the process of their own production, which could be construed as a kind of performance art, to which the art object is completely incidental. That would be utterly unacceptable to me, but then, I would not be very happy about my *Thick Paintings* being viewed in the same way as other art objects (sculpture, for instance) without reference to their mode of genesis.¹⁹⁸

While it is important to understand the *Thick Paintings* as simultaneously matter and process, one must not ignore their third trajectory: a philosophy of acceptance.¹⁹⁹ Whether it be the admission of dreadful desires or merely the acceptance of the inevitable (death, randomness, and constraint), the *Thick Paintings* are as permissive as Cameron's videos, albeit in a superficially impersonal way. If what they admit is *Numb Bares III* – despair, folly, and potent, unfulfilled yearning – then it is admitted as a third term: “the full body is introduced as a third term in a series without destroying ... the essential binary-linear nature of the series: 2, 1, 2, 1 ...”²⁰⁰ *Numb Bares III* is something inevitable that secrets itself between the alternating layers of white and gray gesso.²⁰¹

Instead of a core that can be seen as the heart of an artistic organism, perhaps, in dealing with Cameron's art – particularly the *Thick Paintings* – it would be better to postulate an experimental matrix, an interweaving of process, matter and immanence: Deleuze and

¹⁹⁸ Eric Cameron, *Exposed / Concealed*, 6.

¹⁹⁹ Eric Cameron, “Why I Was So Pleased ...,” *Desire and Dread*, 20.

²⁰⁰ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem & Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 14.

²⁰¹ Cameron's process of paint application consists of one coat of white gesso followed by a coat of gesso mixed with a small portion of black acrylic paint followed by white again and so on.

Guattari's Body without Organs (BwO). A BwO is perhaps best understood as an experimental diagram or protocol. It is both a radical, heterogeneous constitution-cum-event that is irreducible to an organism, subject or semiotic while at the same time making those structures (modes of stratification) possible. Describing the BwO as opposed to or different from the Body does not properly convey its alterity, an alterity that is crudely comparable to *différence* (the 'differing of difference' or the 'force of differing'), and to which Baudrillard's conception of 'otherness' undoubtedly owes a debt.²⁰² As such, it is possible for Deleuze and Guattari to write that the body without organs is "where everything is played out;"²⁰³ it is immanent. The traits of this inevitable matrix (what Deleuze and Guattari often call a rhizome) are numerous and complex, and bear such a startling relevance to the instance of the *Thick Paintings* that it is difficult to resist assembling even the most rudimentary encounter between the two.

Before we go any further with this temptation, an additional set of distinctions should be made. Deleuze and Guattari map the BwO according to four principles (four being roughly equivalent to Derrida's quadrature of the dialectic).²⁰⁴

1.) *There are different types or genres of BwOs.* Some of these types include the BwO of the drug user, the masochist, the schizophrenic and courtly love. "That there are other

²⁰² See Jean Baudrillard, "Radical Otherness," *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. James Benedict (London & New York: Verso, 1993).

²⁰³ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 151.

²⁰⁴ See Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1985), 272 – 275.

ways, other procedures than masochism, and certainly better ones, is beside the point: it is enough that some find this procedure suitable for them.”²⁰⁵

2.) *What happens on a BwO is not the same as how one is constructed although they appear the same: they are twins.* In other words, procedure must be distinguished from mode, doing (constitution, i.e.: masochist sewing and flogging) from style (intensity, i.e.: a masochistic rhetoric of pain), but each is included in the other.²⁰⁶

3.) *There is a potential totality of all the bodies without organs.* This is what Deleuze and Guattari call the *Plane of Consistency* or *Field of Immanence*. It should not be understood as absolute consistency (equivalence or sameness), but rather as radical heterogeneity (consistent, or rather persistent, inconsistency) – the inevitability of chance.

4.) *BwOs can be fascist, cancerous and suicidal.* The experimentations of a BwO can easily tip over into totalitarianism and catastrophe. This is the danger of all BwOs, and it is exemplified by the empty drug addict, the sovereign sadist, and the fascist death machine. In this instance the attempt to deterritorialise the organism or social strata transforms itself into its opposite: radical reterritorialisation as manic “stratic proliferation.” This is the case with those avant-garde movements that began as flights from the social order and ended as fascism, i.e.: Futurism. At the same time, however, constituting a BwO is perhaps the only way in which we may “keep an eye out for all that is fascist, even inside us, and also for the suicidal and the demented.”²⁰⁷ This means accepting one’s desires, but also accepting that they are better limited, not for the sake of society, but for their own sake. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari go so far as to postulate a

²⁰⁵ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 155.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 152.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 165.

joy (fullness) specific to desire left unfulfilled. Although, in its extreme, sadism is catastrophic it never actually succeeds. An infinite crime can never be manifested and remains possible only as a mania of reason.

If we are to conceive of the *Thick Paintings* as an event of a body without organs it must not be as a presentation or manifestation of this event. This means relinquishing the prevalent notion that the *Thick Paintings* are “physical manifestations of the spiritual world,”²⁰⁸ or illustrations, negative or otherwise, of chance, inevitability and the “larger forces that circumscribe human existence.”²⁰⁹ Cameron himself never describes the paintings as representations and evokes the above concepts only as they pertain to an “awareness.” What the *Thick Paintings* present us with, then, is an impersonal protocol of experimentation. They show us how to make, instead of merely showing us, a body without organs.

It is important to differentiate, among the complexities of this protocol, a process of constitution (system, ritual), a surface upon which something comes to pass and is recorded (matter and degrees of intensity) and a *field of imminence* or *plane of consistency* (chance, the inhuman, desire, what Cameron sometimes calls “biology”). According to Deleuze and Guattari, a BwO is desire – a “continuous process of positive desire.”²¹⁰ As such it is desire that has not been delivered to the “three phantoms”:

²⁰⁸ Nancy Tousley, “Divine Comedy,” *Canadian Art* (Spring: 1991), 60.

²⁰⁹ Eric Cameron, *Bent Axis Approach*, 3.

²¹⁰ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 155.

internal lack (which is satiated by Pleasure), higher transcendence (Death), and apparent exteriority (Reality).²¹¹ The desire of a BwO is potent. Pleasure disrupts it and its ‘unfulfilled yearning’ that admits everything, especially those things whose denial is an “utterly crippling torment.”²¹² Thus the paradox of release through denial.²¹³ “Everything is allowed as long as it is not external to desire or transcendent to its plane.”²¹⁴ The BwO functions, in this sense, much like the privileged context of art “where doing is not doing,”²¹⁵ and where one can transform so-called ‘perversion’ into sedition (which reminds us of the discrepancy between Sade’s deeds and his phantasies / Phantasy).

If productive desire is what may be called libido – a procreative, pleasure-driven entity – then the BwO is nonproductive desire; it is libidinal energy that has been transformed into an energy of disjunctive inscription.²¹⁶ This inscription can be compared to the surplus that is inscribed in the surfaces of the *Thick Paintings*, not as the accreted layers of paint, but as the irregularities, ridges, cracks, and ‘cobble-stones’ that the accretion produces. Deleuze and Guattari align the energy of this inscription with Numen, but only with the understanding that while it may be a ‘divine energy’ it is not God.²¹⁷ Cameron’s own understanding of his practice echoes the stipulations of this alignment: “‘Material mysticism’ is my term for my art practice and I call my theory of art a ‘mystical

²¹¹ Ibid., 154, 156 – 157.

²¹² Eric Cameron, “Why I Was So Pleased...,” *Desire and Dread*, 25.

²¹³ Eric Cameron, *Sex, Lies and Lawn Grass*, 4.

²¹⁴ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 156.

²¹⁵ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

²¹⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 13.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

materialism.' I call myself an atheist."²¹⁸ The energy that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, sweeps through the BwO is divine because it attracts to itself the entire process of production and serves as its "miraculate, enchanted surface," inscribing in it each and every one of its disjunctions.²¹⁹ Divine energy is, in other words, a desire filled with its own inevitability – as though it were "filled by itself and its contemplations"²²⁰ – which co-opts the entire process of production, creating its own nonproductive surface of bumps and disorder. In this light, the surface of the *Thick Paintings* must be understood as doubled: both an application and a disjunction. They are at once "oversized baroque pearls built up layer by nacreous layer over a prolonged period of irritation,"²²¹ and gigantic turds, "dead moment[s] fallen out of the digestive process."²²² Consumption of a turd will only make another turd.

The full body without organs is produced as anti-production. It is an energy in which work gets away from intention: "all the things I value in my art have happened against my will or tangentially to my will."²²³ At the same time, it is also the process that facilitates this 'get away' (a line of flight). The BwO provides the very process into which it intervenes (it is its own intervention, i.e.: pleasure) "for the sole purpose of rejecting any attempt to impose on it any sort of triangulation implying that it was produced by parents. How could this body have been produced by parents, when by its

²¹⁸ Eric Cameron, Calgary, to Emily Falvey, Montreal, personal correspondence, November 7, 1999.

²¹⁹ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 13.

²²⁰ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 155.

²²¹ Leslie Dawn, "Pleasures of Paradox – Works of Eric Cameron," *Desire and Dread*, 3.

²²² Jane Gallop, *Intersections*, 47.

²²³ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey, February 25, 2000.

very nature it is such an eloquent witness of its own self-production, of its own engendering of itself?"²²⁴ "Painting painting itself," a phrase that Cameron devised in 1977 to describe the work of his colleague and fellow-layer painter Garry Neill Kennedy, seems to resonate here. The article for which this phrase was the title ends on a similar note by quoting Kennedy: "it's the sort of work that allows the maker to be something else or to do something else."²²⁵

The body without organs (unproductive and unconsumable) thus functions as a surface upon which "the entire process of production of desire" is recorded and inscribed.²²⁶ "The essential thing is the establishment of an enchanted recording or inscribing surface" upon which is exercised a "recording code, which does not coincide with the social code, or coincides with it only to parody it."²²⁷ Cameron's meticulous application of paint to mundane, household objects such as beer bottles and alarm clocks can be seen as a parody of industrial modes of production and post-industrial modes of consumption. And while, on the surface, this activity may seem like an adaptive perpetuation of those modes, the self-produced disjunction that occurs at their surfaces should be seen as parody or 'black' humour. "[B]lack humor does not attempt to resolve contradictions, but to make it so that there are none, and never were any."²²⁸

²²⁴ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 15.

²²⁵ Garry Neill Kennedy, quoted by Eric Cameron, "Garry Kennedy: Painting Painting Itself," *Artforum*, XV, 9 (May: 1977): 51.

²²⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 13.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 15.

²²⁸ I am well aware of the colonial impropriety of the term 'black humour.' It is, however, the phrase used in the translation of *Anti-Oedipus*, and is meant to indicate, in that context, a 'dark' or perverse 'humour'; Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 11.

In this way, the BwO involves a slippery, disjunctive surface that is simultaneously illusive and tangible. On this 'enchanted' recording plane organs, interpretations and subjects slide about, not as fragments, but as processes of disorganisation. A *Thick Painting* is similarly covered with such indefinite organs. We are consistently tempted to anthropomorphise them, thus discerning *a* mouth opening in the surfaces of paint, *a* bunch of pores, *a* vagina, *an* eye, or a woman's upturned bottom.²²⁹ It is also covered with interpretations ("*ces objets, ces matières, ces forms sont aussi des métaphores, des allégories, des symboles*"²³⁰), and subjects ("Is this art? No, this is Eric."²³¹). While these things swarm about "as a lion's mane swarms with fleas,"²³² the paintings themselves continue to surprise. "It is important to me to insist that that the art always came first; my attempts to unravel its implications later ... It was because the thick paintings took me by surprise and took me along a different track from the art I observed around me that I found it necessary to explain, but explaining involved the use of words and using words allowed me to be caught in the trap of language. There are times when you just can't win! I may be digging myself deeper as I write."²³³

In the place of interpretation the body without organs substitutes experimental programmes. This is in order to free itself from the "trap of language" that blocks the movement of energy and intensity across its surface, carves it up into an organism and

²²⁹ Eric Cameron, *Desire and Dread*, 22 – 24.

²³⁰ Olivier Asselin, "Eric Cameron," *Parachute* (Juillet, Août, Septembre: 1990), 30.

²³¹ Steven Burns, "Laying it On Thin: Eric Cameron," *Vanguard* (November: 1985), 17.

²³² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 16.

²³³ Eric Cameron, "Why I Was So Pleased...", *Desire and Dread*, 18.

pins it to a subject. As such, the BwO is what remains “when you take everything away,” i.e.: interpretation, organism, subject. It is a surplus, a reminder: the irreducible, unrepresentable exorbitance of the unformed (neither formed nor formless). Such a subtraction requires caution. If one proceeds to subtract one’s Self (organism, subject, and significance) from the plane of consistency too quickly in a wild deterritorialisation of the organism, catastrophe can occur: death, both corporeal and psychic, as well as desolation and emptiness. This is the case, more often than not, with drug addiction (‘Junk’) and sadism. It is also why Cameron speaks of “taking risks within one’s art” that lead “close to an edge that is absolutely terrifying.”²³⁴ These risks are necessary “if you take your art seriously;” they are part of “an obligation to admit the truth to yourself, even though you may also acknowledge that that truth is something whose expression properly has to be limited.”²³⁵

The constitution of a body without organs involves an art of caution - “not wisdom, caution. In doses. As a rule immanent to experimentation: injections of caution.”²³⁶ You don’t do it with a sledgehammer, but a very fine file (a small brush or a spank). Try getting drunk on water and high on repetition. Desexualise a process to the point that it resexualises everything on an impersonal level.²³⁷ All the while stay aware of the edge along which you move; it marks the threshold of an abyss in which experiments become fascist and harmless spanking transforms itself into total, manic punishment.

²³⁴ Eric Cameron, interviewed by Emily Falvey.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 150.

²³⁷ See, Gilles Deleuze & Sacher von Masoch, *Masochism*, 123 –134.

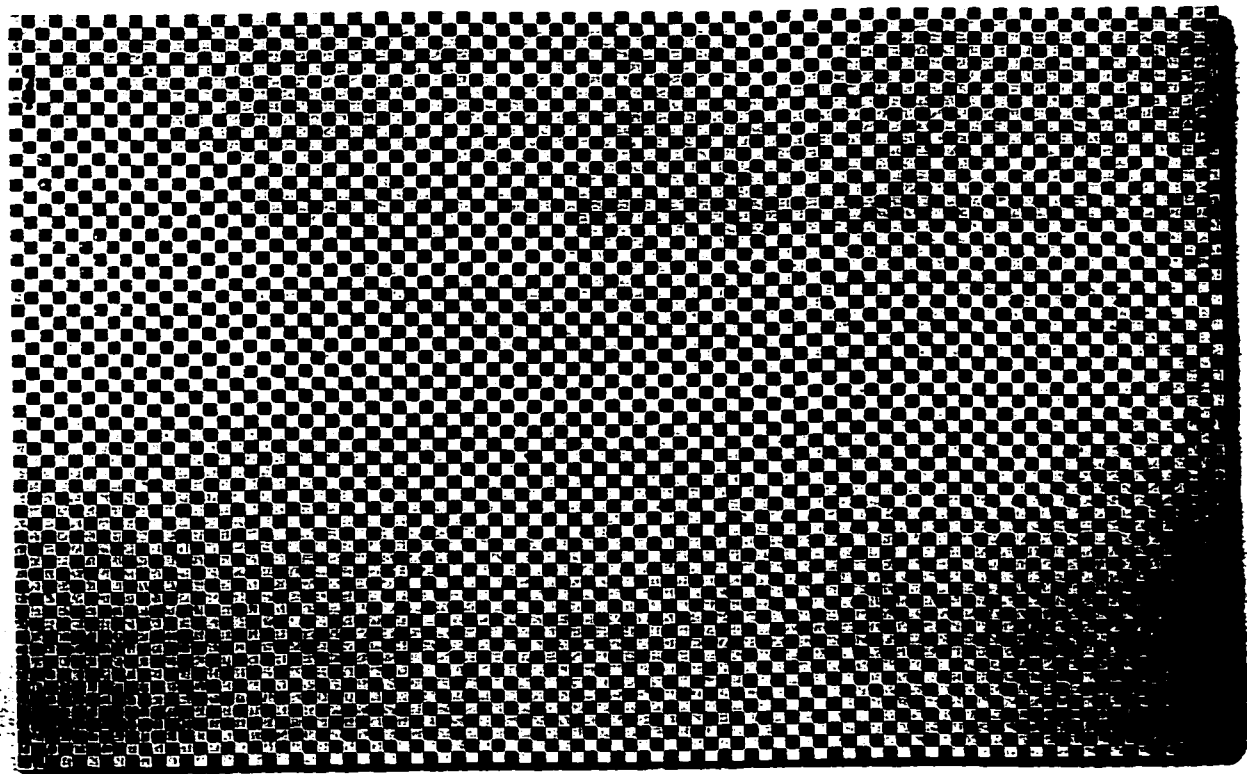
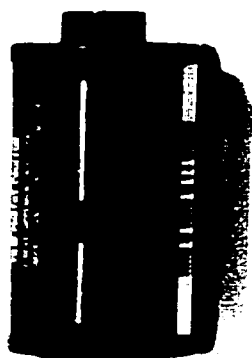


Figure 9

EXPOSER/CACHER

(EXPOSED/CONCEALED)



par Eric Cameron

Notes pour un projet et une installation : Ecole Nationale de la Photographie,
Arles/Provence et le Musée d'Art contemporain de Montréal/Québec

Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

Conclusion

The Question of Experimentation

*There is the passivity which is passive quiet (suggested, perhaps, by what we know of quietism); and then there is the passivity which is beyond disquietude, but which nevertheless retains the passiveness of the incessant, feverish, even-uneven movement of error which has no purpose, no end, no starting principle.*²³⁸

We are all aware that there is a type of questioning that supposes there to be no answer. In fact, this unanswerability is how the question posits its immortality; philosophical thought is eternal because its 'why' has no answer – it just rolls ceaselessly over time and space. Individual philosophers may die, whole sections of humanity disappear, but the unanswerable will continue as before, undiminished as always. A truly philosophical question has no answer; otherwise it is just technical.²³⁹

Experimentation is a matter of questions. It is a mass of lines and possible directions: Can this be done? How much further can we go? What happens? What now? And so on ... Like philosophical questions the answer remains ambiguous and impossible. *We can go until we are blocked, but is that really the end? Maybe this can't be done, but I keep trying.* Unlike philosophical questions, however, experimental questions are,

²³⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 15-16.

²³⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 8-23.

paradoxically, not unanswerable. They have a specific response: something happens. The answer to an experimental question is not an answer; it is an action or an event. *I try by trial and error to make straight lines, but they keep getting away from me. Where are my crooked lines? I must find them in the order of the straight ones. I must do something. Something happens.* Non-teleological experimentation, what was called programmatic or rhetorical avant-gardism in the introduction, waits expectantly for this something to happen. It waits, therefore, for chance and the unforeseen. This expectancy is, at the same time, a task, a search which, in the words of Blanchot, seeks – seeking nothing – that which exhausts being exactly where it represents itself as inexhaustible.²⁴⁰ Experimentation is in between, waiting patiently for the unrepresentable, chasing it through this passivity which is also a passage. Experimentation follows the spectre of chance in its flight from perception. To fail without fail: this is a sign of passivity.²⁴¹ We haven't a ghost of a chance.

“There is a question and yet no doubt; there is a question, but no desire for an answer; there is a question, and nothing that can be said, but just this nothing, to say. This is a query, a probe that surpasses the very possibility of questions.”²⁴² *I do not seek I find. I'm finding out.* In what Blanchot calls variously ‘the vanity of the incessant’, ‘the repetitiveness of the interminable’ and ‘the passiveness of the incessant’ one may seek that which escapes reason; the death which makes life possible, the aporia of laughter, the

²⁴⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 89.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴² Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 9.

erotic, the feminine, the joyful, the inevitable ... ecstatic silence.²⁴³ One will, of course, never find it, but in a sense the search - failing without fail - is a sort of sublime embodiment. Not a body in the sense of a presentation or image, nor even a fragmented body that would present the impossible whole as absence, but an unformed body (which is not the same as formless), a body that is nothing but speeds and intensities, feelings and becomings. A body without organs that transforms the compositions of order - lines of segmentation - into the components of passage: lines of flight.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 15-16, 89.

²⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 110.

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